

原作・監修：「艦これ」運営鎮守府

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艦隊これくしょん

-艦これ-

鶴翼の絆



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「はあ～、やつぱり、
温泉はいいよねえ……」

湯船に浸かりながら、
感極まったような
声をあげる瑞鶴。

Chapter 1: The Sea God's Maiden

Part 1

The seas around Okinoshima [\[1\]](#) lay beneath a cloudless, clear sky. Towering rain clouds loomed on the horizon against the background of the azure sky. A cool seabreeze blew, ruffling the clear, endless sea with waves. Just a moment later, an immense explosion and plumes of sea foam put an end to this scenic view.

"SHIT ! Five enemy abyssals, still alive! Did those 1stCarDiv sisters [\[2\]](#) get carried away by their pride and focused their attacks on a single ship again?!"

"Remaining Abyssals, two BBs, 1 CA, 2DD--! We'll keep their main force pinned down; Akagi, Kaga, launch another air strike!"

"We don't need you to tell me! I'm the flagship this time around, save your breath--Kaga?!"

"Understood. Preparing a second wave at once."

Akagi and Kaga halted behind Kongou, launching their aircraft. Countless arrows shot into the sky--a moment later, the arrows split even further into the fairy-piloted carrier planes. In order to launch a successful attack, the carrier planes needed to congregate above the carriers before launching as a single group.

It was at this time that an enemy vessel loomed in front of Kongou and company. As large as a whale, it charged across the surface of the water with reckless abandon."

"...two destroyers in front of us--Ha-class, I believe!"

"This is Akagi. Hibiki, Yukikaze, it's up to you! [\[3\]](#)"

"Understood. Hibiki, breaking off to engage the enemy destroyers."

"Yukikaze understands. Just leave it to me!"

As if responding to Akagi's voice [\[4\]](#), the two destroyer-classed shipgirls in front of Kongou raised their speed. Hibiki's face remained expressionless. Yukikaze, on the other hand, broke into an almost cocksure grin, as if she were already confident of something."

"Hibiki onee-san! I'll be the the bait, Hibiki onee-san, hit 'em from the back! If it's me I won't get hit so easily!"

"Acknowledged--also, don't call me onee-san, we're both destroyers."

"That won't do. Hibiki-onee-san is the senpai. Anyhow, I'll be relying on you!"

"Understood...spasibo. [\[5\]](#)"

"Iyaaaahhhhh--!"

Gripping tightly to the turret slung on her shoulder, Yukikaze charged towards the enemy--and, a moment later, let fly with several volleys

In a blink of an eye, the shells reached the two enemy destroyers, raising pillars of water around them [\[6\]](#)--undeterred, the enemy destroyers opened their gaping mouths, returning fire with belches of flame.

"Yukikaze will never sink!"

Hopping and skipping, Yukikaze dodged as she returned fire, at times deliberately leaping into the waterspouts--it was said, after all, that places where shells had hit would not be hit again.

On the other hand, Hibiki had already maneuvered to the enemy vessels' side. As Yukikaze ducked and weaved, Hibiki stopped, eyeing the enemy destroyers with a sniper's gaze, and then--"

"Well then, let's begin...open fire!"

With the explosion, a shell shot out of the barrel--the foremost enemy destroyer shuddered with an explosion to its side, its hull pierced. Belching black smoke, the enemy ship slowed to a stop.

Judging Hibiki to be a greater threat than Yukikaze, the remaining enemy destroyer came about, rushing in Hibiki's direction.

"Hibiki onee-san!?"

"Yukikaze, finish that damaged destroyer!"

"....Aye, understood!"

Yukikaze put the struggling, still-fighting enemy destroyer out of its misery with a short volley. Hibiki, too, distanced herself from the enemy destroyer, evading and looking for a chance to resume fire.

"I can't lose either!"

Glancing at Yukikaze and Hibiki's fierce battle, Kongou's mouth twisted into a scary smile.

"Kirishima, let's also get in there!"

"Understood, Onee-sama!"

Cruising at Kongou's side, Kirishima replied, her gaze behind her glasses that of an intellectual.

In front of Kirishima and kongou, the silhouettes of two human-sized figures stood before them. Tall and full of grace, their dark, flowing hair would have lent them a certain allure--were it not for the grotesque turrets on their arms.



"Onee-sama, distance and angle are now sufficient--if we fire now we should have a good chance of hitting them."

"Understood, うて^了!"

"Hit--!"

The two battleships slowed to a halt as the guns on their back-mounted outfits opened up with a cacophony and blast of smoke that no destroyer could hope to attain. It would be impractical to maintain a high speed while aiming with any measure of reliability; as such, Kongou and Kirishima resumed their movement thereafter, stopping only to fire another volley.

On the other side, the two enemy battleships had also started firing. Facing a barrage that came down like the rain, they put up hexagonal barriers--magical "armor"--in an attempt to repel enemy fire. Likewise, Kongou and Kirishima also put up their defenses.

Both side's barriers shuddered under repeated AP shell impacts and the constant explosions that followed. Kongou and Kirishima's barriers were gradually falling apart--meanwhile, the enemy barriers seemed virtually untouched.

"Tch, they sure are tough," Kongou muttered under her breath as she felt the strain on her spiritual power--and then her barrier collapsed as an explosion racked her body.

"Onee-sama....?!"

The sea was shrouded in black smoke--inside it, Kongou fell to her knees, gritting her teeth against the pain. The outfit on her was virtually inoperable due to severe damage.

At the same time, the enemy vessels bellowed once more. Two enemy ships were still up and fighting. Moreover, a heavy cruiser had charged in from the side in an attempt to reach Kaga and Akagi in the rearguard.

"...mmn. Kaga, Akagi! Quickly!"

"Don't rush me! Second attack team, launch!"

Having assembled into a group, the carrier planes charged once more towards the enemy vessels. The sea was punctuated by geysers--and yet, seconds later, the two enemy vessels came back into view, damaged but alive.

"The enemy's defenses have gotten stronger...!"

Akagi and Kaga weren't the smartest [\[8\]](#)--nevertheless, Akagi quickly collected herself and made her decision.

"Kirishima, please! At this rate you guys will also be finished! At this rate we and the destroyers...--before that happens, bring down one of those battleships! Leave the other one to us! Let the Heavy Cruiser do its worst!"

"Understood! Really, I'm not suited for this kind of role.....!"

Accelerating to full speed, Kirishima suddenly charged towards one of the enemy battleships.

"WoooaoaAAAAAAHHHHH--!!"

Closing to point blank range, Kirishima blazed away once again. At this range, there was no dodging--her barrier wilted under the sustained fire. And yet, the enemy ship was in the same position. Both vessels attacked wildly, prepared for mutual destruction. Kirishima was the first to pierce the barrier. Barrier completely

destroyed, the enemy vessel's silhouette loomed through the explosion.

And yet, the other enemy battleship had locked onto Kirishima. With a roar, her main gun's shells zoned in on Kirishima. This one would certainly penetrate if it hit--.

"....Tch! So you're going to shoot me, so what?!!!!"

Assured that Akagi and Kaga and launched a new attack unit, Kirishima opened fire with all guns.

Several hours later, surrounded by the ships that had fled the battle, the office was inundated in a pervading gloom.

"I'm really sorry, 'Admiral'..."

Akagi, the shipgirl delegated with the important role of flagship, hung her head among the six shipgirls, covered in wounds."

"It's because we weren't strong enough that this campaign...had to be abandoned."

"Don't be so crestfallen, there'll be other chances."

The young man called "Admiral", clad in the white Type 1 Uniform of the Navy, replied as he glanced through the report.

"It seems like the abyssals in this area are much stronger than the other abyssals in the area. That itself was valuable information. I'm sure the brass will agree."

"But, if this continues"

The "Admiral" raised his hand to stop Akagi.

"There's still time. For now, we should re-consolidate our forces and prepare for the decisive battle. Although I understand your feelings...let's go back. As long as we can retreat, we can always return [\[9\]](#).

Akagi nodded with difficulty. In order to dispel the somber mood, the "Admiral" coughed emphatically.

"Kongou, this time around, was the enemy's increased strength that much more noticeable?"

"Yeah! They were pretty strong!"

In spite of her wounds, Kongou responded breezily.

My guns weren't much use. It was like facing those new enemy warships in 'that war' [\[10\]](#)!"

"We also felt that the enemy ships have gotten stronger."

Akagi and Kaga joined, nodding.

I feel as if the ineffectiveness of our aerial attacks is due to this.of course, I don't deny that I was a little overconfident."

"Is that so. In that case, this is a good time to strengthen our own fleet."

"Strengthen our fleet? Good time?"

Kirishima looked a little incredulous. With a bit of a smile, the "Admiral" responded--

A new standard carrier has joined our naval district.

Part 2

The first thing that came into view were the old-looking boards that formed the wooden ceiling.

"Hm.....?"

The newly awakened maiden blinked a few times, stunned by her surroundings.

"This is...."

Murmuring as she examined her surroundings, the young girl slowly pieced together her situation.

She had been sleeping (quite comfortably on a bed, in a tight little six-tatami room [\[11\]](#)). In contrast, the furnishings were quite replete--a set of clothes lay by the pillow, cleaned and folded.

No matter how you looked at it, it seemed like a japanese hotel room--a bit of an old fashioned-one at that.



And yet to this young woman, both the fact that she had been sleeping quite soundly in this room and the fact that she could deduce her location left her even more incredulous.

"Because I....am not a human, but a warship, born as the Aircraft Carrier Zuikaku; I've never seen or been to any place like this."

The maid--aircraft carrier Zuikaku sat up, examining her two hands.

"Why have i become...a human girl? Not to mention I had already sunk at Cape Engano to begin with..."

Nobody spoke to answer Zuikaku's questions--the surroundings remained eerily quiet.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, Zuikaku looked around once more at her room.

As expected, it was simply a room in a relatively normal hotel, though she felt herself cool a little as she calmed down. A weak sunbeam crept lazily through the window--it seemed like it was winter.

"What on earth...what is going on around here?"

At that moment, something went "bang" behind her. Zuikaku turned on reflex.

"Eh! ...A cat?"

And indeed it was simply a cat, a black and white-spotted fellow that must have slunk in from god knows where. It closed in without changing expression, seemingly unafraid of ZUikaku.

"I saw cats a few times at the factory and on board...but to think that one day I'd have the chance to pet one..."

As soon as she reached out fondly to pet the cat's head, the kitten leapt past, dashing to the folded clothes and picking up a piece.

"Oh, that's..."

No matter how you look at it, that was a bra.

And with that, the kitten fled, hightailing to freedom through a gap in the door, bra in mouth.

"Ah, that, eh?"

Zuikaku looked down at her own chest--she was wearing a bathrobe--no underwear, at any rate. Zuikaku the blood rush to her face--without that bra, she would have nothing to wear at all.

"Oi ye thievin' lil' cunt! I'll fookin' glass ye when I catch ye--!"

Reflexively tightening her sash, Zuikaku shot off in pursuit of the cat.

Flinging the door open, Zuikaku raced into a long corridor, flanked on each side by numerous sliding doors.

(As expected, a hotel.....but there are more pressing matters right now....!)

The cat dashed down the corridor. Zuikaku pursued with equal desperation, rubbing shoulders with a girl as she passed by.

"Zuikaku onee-san! You're awake, then--!" The girl spoke to Zuikaku with a voice full of vitality, cutting quite the figure in her elegant uniform. Zuikaku responded involuntarily--

"Y, you are?!"

"Destroyer Maikaze! From the 4th Destroyer Division!"

Zuikaku swallowed her surprise. In the Indian Ocean Raid and the Battle of the South Pacific, the 4th Destroyer Division had been known for its steadfast protection of Zuikaku's own 1st Carrier Division on countless battlefield.

"Hopefully next time I can dance a real Odori-Bon with Zuikaku oneesan, and not this kind of dodgy maneuver!"

In the many battles Zuikaku and Maikaze had experienced, there was an anti-air maneuver that came to be called the Odori-bon.

"Ah, I'm looking forwards to i--! Wait that's not right. If you're here, does that mean that there are other warships that became humans?!"

"They call us shipgirls here, y'know--!"

(Shipgirls?! So we've become a humanoid existence...?!)

The kitten had by now passed through the hallway, and was now dashing for the main hall, weaving through the legs of several young women (dressed in beautiful dresses, just like Maikaze) with arms full of laundry.

"Ara ara, to run between my legs...how brazen~"

"G-gwailo?! And stonking great tits too!"

This newly met maiden had airy golden hair and, seemingly, a lot of stuffing underneath her dress. [\[12\]](#)

"I'm the heavy cruiser Atago, pleased to meet you. Well, more like pleased to meet you again. Shipgirls aren't only Yamato Nadeshiko, you know."

"I-is that so?"

Though the memory was a little fuzzy, Atago should have taken part in the third battle of the Solomons and the Marianas [\[13\]](#). A veteran cruiser of a hundred battles, she was known for her ability to keep her balance in spite of her heavy armament--perhaps a legacy reflected in her current body."

"Oh by the way, that cat's name is called Wanker [\[14\]](#). He's the naval district's second-in-command. Please take care of him."

"Wanker? Not Weigh Anchor? Also, calling a hotel a naval district, what's goning on....?!"

"This is the Hotel called the Naval District, just remember that, huehuehue~"

"I,I'm deeply grateful!"

Still chasing the cat, Zuikaku charged around Atago--but even so, the distance from the cat did not appear to have diminished much.

Wanker passed through the great hall, straight into the kitchen. As expected, several girls that appeared to be shipgirls, clad in aprons, were preparing food on the stove.

(There are shipgirls in the kitchen too?! What the hell is going on?!)

"Hey~ Tenryuu-chan, the first serving of breakfast's done~ come over and have a taste~"

"Oh!hmhm, as expected of Tatsuta's Tatsutir-fry [\[15\]](#), it's delicious!"

"Oh no~ though I came up with the recipe, I feel like I haven't had much practice~"

"For me [\[16\]](#) to learn Tatusta-chan's cooking is already satisfying enough.....uwah....cat?!"

"Arara~if it isn't Wanker-chan~"

Wanker wasted no time dashing away from the two--not, however, in the direction of the Tatsutir-fry.

"Arara~Wanker-chan likes bras more than Tatsutir-fry, huh? It turned out so tasty too~"

"Ah--- Sorry, pardon--!"

Red-faced as she rushed through the kitchen and past the two, Zuikaku said.

"Ah! A new face! My name's Tenryuu, and this is Tatsuta. From here on out, pleased to meet you!"

If memory hadn't failed, those two should be the first and second ships Tenryuu-class light cruisers , frequent partners in transport missions.

"I'll be in your care! Just asking, but why did I find you two in the kitchen...?"

"This hotel is maintained by us shipgirls, and it's up to us to prepare the food. There's quite a lot of us, so it's quite a job~"

"Is that so..."

"Also, if you keep going that way, you'll get to the Admiral's command room..."

"I...if there's anything else, we can talk about it later!"

Zuikaku and Wanker barreled straight out of the kitchen, back into a hallway. Right in front of Zuikaku loomed a heavy, western-style door.

(This...where is this)

"Zui, kaku...."

It was a voice Zuikaku had never heard before, and yet it was a voice whose intimacy instantly brought back old memories. Shocked, Zuikaku ran forwards to where Wanker was dashing with all its might, scanning the room.

A shipgirl, dressed in seemingly the same attire as Zuikaku, clung to a young man in a white military uniform and gazed at the newcomer with an expression of shock. Wearing a red headband over fine silver hair, white robe and red pants with brown eyes and a breastplate emblazoned with a "シ,"--a second later, her name left Zuikaku's lips.

"It can't be, Shoukaku-nee"

"Oy, oy.....!"

The young fellows voice seemed a little frantic. Zuikaku and the young man were about to collide--and Wanker, of course, had already positioned itself between them.

"O-outta my way--!"

With panicky steps, Zuikaku tried to slow down--instead, she tripped, tumbling forwards--

A moment later, Zuikaku collapsed onto the young man, sending them both onto the ground.

"Ah Owowowow....ah, are you alright?!"

"Uh. uhuh"

The teenager responded with a gasp of pain. Zuikaku hurried to get up--and then froze in place

The impact of the crash had flung open the collar of her bathrobe, and (For reasons unknown) the young man's right hand now grasped firmly on Zuikaku's left boob.

As Zuikaku remained frozen, the young man confirmed his situation in relation to Zuikaku as a twisted smile crawled across his face (keikaku doori)

"They don't seem that big if you look at them, but honestly, they're not as bad as you'd think....."

--Tch!"

Blushing furiously, Zuikaku forced out such a soundless sound--near-instantaneously, Zuikaku's uniform changed to one similar to shoukaku's as a bundle of carrier planes appeared above her head--

"You can't, Zuikaku! Calm down...."

"You Bastard--!"

"Oy, wait, don't...."

Following closely behind Zuikaku's shriek, the carrier planes flew at the young man--

Part 3

In the end, Wanker was caught by a group of destroyers with MAX capture abilities.

"Owowowowowow...."

"Are you alright, admiral?"

It was a scene that escaped words.

A previously impeccably arranged command room; the "admiral," rashly wounded by her hand; and Shoukaku-nee, who watched in concern while rubbing ointment on the "admiral."

As the elder sister, Shoukaku was a shipgirl of the same class--of this Zuikaku was overjoyed. But, exactly because of that, she was thrown into confusion..

What exactly are the so-called shipgirls? How many shipgirls are in the Naval District Hotel? What is the current time period, and where is this? Why is the young man in front of her called "Admiral?" He was far too young for that rank.

When did the weapons she had attacked the "Admiral" with disappear? For that matter, how did they appear? This seemed like the ability of the shipgirls.

(No matter how you look at it, I didn't do anything wrong, right.....)

As she remembered that moment of hostility, Zuikaku pursed her lips.

(Well, everyone makes mistakes like these sometimes.....it was just an accident, just an accident!)

Sitting on a chair in front of the desk with all his boo-boos dabbed with neosporin, the "Admiral" and Shoukaku eyed each other.

"Thanks a lot, Shoukaku, it's fine now."

"Really? Does it really not hurt anywhere?"

Shoukaku pushed on with a worried look. Though Shoukaku was her sister, she seemed like a gentle, caring person--quite a different first impression compared to Zuikaku.

"Ahah, compared to that, I'd much rather snuggle up with you. Just like this--"

No sooner had he finished that the "Admiral" reached for Shoukaku's skirt--he was hurriedly stopped by Shoukaku before Zuikaku could angrily get up.

"N-no, you can't.....! Right now I'm doing secretary work. Plus, my sister's right there....."

"Then are you saying it's okay as soon as we're done?! Alone time for two?! Is that it?!"

"T-that's not okay either!"

"Ahem."

Zuikaku coughed emphatically. From appearance, her first impression of the "Admiral" had been completely correct--a degenerate who touches his secretary.

Shoukaku-nee and "Admiral" both looked flustered as Zuikaku turned around. Finally, the two eked out two quiet coughs.

"Well, that was just our little joke,"

the "Admiral" explained with a weak chuckle as he passed the problem [\[12\]](#) to Shoukaku

"Don't you want to talk with your sister? I'm sure she's worried about the current situation."

Zuikaku responded with a small voice.

"Well, uh, it is actually pretty confusing..."

"Well then, I'll start by introducing myself."

The "Admiral" extended his right hand, speaking with a sincerity that had not been there before--as if his temperament had completely changed.

"I am "Admiral." Although that's not my given name, it's what everyone calls me. I'm the caretaker of this Naval District Hotel, and also serve as its manager--that is, the commanding officer."

"I'm Zuikaku. I'm, uh...a fleet aircraft carrier?"

Zuikaku replied with a touch of ambiguity as she shook with her own hand. Her own memory seemed correct, though a little incompatible with her current situation. Better to end it with a question mark.

The "Admiral" nodded, as if he understood completely.

"Don't worry. You are, indeed, the fleet carrier Zuikaku. Judging by your response, you still have some memories from 'That War'?"

"Mm, that's the gist of it....."

"That War." Zuikaku felt an angry twinge at the phrase. If this was the world after "That War," it should not have such a vague name.

Shoukaku appeared to have noticed Zuikaku's sense of violation. As if to reassure herself, she lowered her head slightly. The "Admiral," too, responded with a nod.

"Then I'll cut straight to the point." The "Admiral" looked directly at Zuikaku. "Apparently you shipgirls are another form of those illustrious warships from 'That War.'"

A new form--as she realized what the "Admiral" meant, Zuikaku felt a chill run down her spine. She was going to be a shipgirl, walking down the next step of her life.

But Zuikaku's questions had not been completely resolved."

"Apparently'...what a flippant way of saying things."

"It can't be helped. We and you, your pasts and our pasts, it is all a mystery. --Shoukaku?"

"Yessir. Zuikaku, could you look at this for a moment?"

With that, Shoukaku handed the globe on the table to Shoukaku.

"This is...!"

Zuikaku gasped.

("Bataan Island [\[18\]](#)," "the Curry Sea," and "Okinoshima"...they're not the same as the world before.....!")

Once Zuikaku understood, the "Admiral" resumed his explanation: "It is as you see it. That is to say, those battles in which you all fought and, unfortunately, sunk, we can only call them parts of 'that war,' because that is all we know of it. All our knowledge, everything we know, comes from the scraps that you tell us."

"Then....'that war' in this world....."

"You can say it never happened. But, from what you've told us, we're quite a bit more advanced compared to the time when you all lived,"

"....."

"Don't worry. There are virtually no cultural differences between your homeland and this country. Although some things will seem a little different or a little foreign at first, they'll become everyday pretty quickly."

"Is that so...."

Without noticing it, Zuikaku's hands balled into fists. This is not the country she and her comrades bet their lives on. Nothing else hit harder than this fact.

But there were still other questions about their nature.

"Well then, why are we here....?" Zuikaku asked, hesitantly.

The "admiral" stood up from his seat quietly as he walked over to the window.

"This world, it faces an existential threat."

"An existential threat?"

"Shoukaku."

"mm."

Thumbing the TV remote by her hand, Shoukaku turned on the television hanging on the wall. From the screen came an image simultaneously jarring and intimately familiar to Zuikaku: several submarines, belching fire and pitch-black smoke; people were floating on the water's surface, their bodies dyed black from the fuel as they struggled to stay above the water. Most of the ships there were cargo ships and tankers, but among them were intermingled destroyers, cruisers, and even huge aircraft carriers. And yet, the thing that caught Zuikaku's eye was not this hellish scene. Around each stricken ships, the size of a whale, some...thing swam to and fro, feasting on the unfortunate survivors. The remaining destroyers and cruisers desperately fired at the monsters, who completely ignored them [\[19\]](#).

But that was not all. Behind them, floating on the water, appeared to be some things humanoid. As if the vengeful souls of warships and those who died upon them had attained a corporeal, human form--[\[20\]](#)

"This, this is...."

"The Abyssals. The enemies of humankind."

The "Admiral" calmly explained to the speechless Zuikaku.

"Regarding the identity of the Abyssals, there's still a lot we don't know. But one thing is absolutely clear--they mean harm to us, and they wish to conquer the oceans. And we, humans, are powerless to stop them"

"Powerless...how could it be...."

The "Admiral" nodded to Zuikaku as she struggled to find her words.

"Currently, on this planet virtually every sea and ocean is a lake to them. Maritime trade--all the trade routes, connections, convoys, have been completely destroyed. Every country may as well have been blockaded or landlocked. Of course, for us as a mercantile nation, this is an existential threat."

ZUikaku could not even nod. Her own home country had been a mercantile nation as well--with few domestic resources, it could not live without importing and exporting to the outside world. [\[21\]](#) "That War" and this reality were hardly unrelated [\[22\]](#).

"But, if you use air transport, you could theoretically...."

"Air transport can't compare in cargo capacity. Plus there are Aircraft Carrier-type abyssals, like you. At the start we tried

transitioning to air transport, but their carrier planes shot down our cargo planes, and so we've largely given up."

"....."

"The international community is continuing to wage war against the abyssals. But the power gap is too large. The World's navies are already struggling trying to secure the seaboard. Even the seaboard has not been completely secured from amphibious and ground invasion."

The scene Zuikaku watched transitioned to what looked like a coastal area. Against the background of ruined buildings lay the corpses of what seemed like enemy transports.

Zuikaku could not resist another sharp intake of breath. The onslaught of the abyssals had already reached populated areas.

"I heard that you all were born to fight the abyssals. You all possess combat strength, as you just personally proved a moment ago."

Zuikaku absently regarded her own fist. The equipment, weapons and carrier planes that emerged in moments of strong emotion....this was probably the ability of the aircraft carriers. The other shipgirls must have other unique abilities.

"Additionally, as your commanding officer, I must annihilate the abyssals with you all in order to return peace to the oceans."

"Then, the other shipgirls are already...."

"That's right, they've already joined the battle. There have been more than a few casualties as well..."

An indescribable feeling welled up in Zuikaku's chest. While "That War" had spiraled towards a tragic end, this war was still continuing, and the shipgirls were the trump card.

(During "That War", there were many things we couldn't protect.....)

Memories, tragedies from the war floated unbidden to the surface. She had not been able to do anything--she had not even been able to bear her share of her comrade's sorrow before....

(But if I'm here, I can....do it all over, right?)

"This Naval District Hotel was rented for your everyday life, so that you all would form a proper 'naval district.' As such, I and the other shipgirls simple refer it to the 'naval district'."

With a touch of pride, the "Admiral" [23] continued.

"In spite of that, however, this is also a normal hotel, and as such you all are helping with cooking and running the day to day affairs in the hotel. Of course, the real preparations are in the nearby factory.

"In that case, why not just live in the factory to begin with--"

As warships and weapons, living in a factory is normal; the "Admiral", however, replied with a bitter chuckle: "Currently at the naval district hotel there are over a hundred and ten shipgirls. No matter how you spin it, trying to fit you all into a military dock would make things a little tight. As in Tenement Tight."

"Ah, over a hundred and ten....?!"

Quite a few ships had taken part in "That War", but even so Zuikaku felt shock.

"Besides, I don't want to just treat you as warship, or as tools only used when there are things to kill."

The "Admiral"'s steely response made clear his resolve.

"You are not warships and you are not humans. You are 'shipgirls.' I cannot help but send you all to risk your lives in war. But in spite of--no, because of that, I wish that you all can live peaceful and gentle lives until you go out to fight."

After that speech, Zuikaku felt a hint of awe. Compared to the "Admiral" from earlier, this "Admiral" seemed like a completely different person.

"Well then, I hope you can be our vanguard."

"Vanguard?"

"I do not wish for weaker shipgirls to bear the burden of this planet's fate. It was never their, or your fight, after all."

There was a hint of loneliness there, but the Admiral continued: "However, we cannot help but rely on you all. As such, I wish for you all to decide whether we are worth fighting for."

"....."

"Among the shipgirls, there are girls who do not fight on the front lines, but support those who do from behind. For us, they are equally indispensable. The battle is not only decided by those who stand in the van."

The "Admiral"'s explanation made sense--the front line could not carry a nation. Zuikaku herself remembered that training new aircrews consumed the bulk of her time in "That War."

(But the other shipgirls have all chosen to step once more onto the battlefield)

Every shipgirls she had met this morning had without exception volunteered to join this battle. Moreover, Shoukaku-nee, by her side, had done the same.

(In this situation, how could I possibly not fight?)

"No, 'Admiral,'" Zuikaku pronounced with the utmost solemnity, "I, too, will fight the abyssals. After all, I served in "That War" as the Illustrious Aircraft Carrier of the Main Force....!"

"Zuikaku...."

As if fighting to suppress complicated emotions, Shoukaku called softly. The "Admiral", too, nodded firmly.

"Understood. But, for now, please treat this simply as your current decision."

"Current....?"

"In the next two weeks, starting tomorrow, I will treat you as a regular shipgirl." The Admiral raised his index and middle finger.
"When that is over, I wish to hear your conclusion."

Part 4

It was only after the conversation in the office that Zuikaku realized that the Admiral and Shoukaku-nee's Naval District Hotel was surprisingly luxurious.

Although it seemed quite normal from the outside, it proved incredibly spacious. The decor gave off an impression of age and tradition, both inside and out. Moreover, hot springs abounded on the hotel's grounds, including an outdoor spa. It was said that it

was the most popular venue for shipgirls hoping to shed the fatigue of their last campaign.

"We all live here, tending the hotel, learning, training every day."

After saying goodbye to the "Admiral," the two walked down the hallway, Shoukaku explaining to Zuikaku as they went.

That's why this isn't just our Naval district, but our refuge, our shelter. No matter how hard the battles, no matter how tough the obstacles, we fight because we know that, when we come back, all our comrades are waiting for us. It is our blessing."

"We didn't get to see the other girls much during "That War."

Zuikaku nodded regretfully.

The two girl's footstops came naturally to a halt in the lobby, having toured through the entirety of the naval district.

"Right, the Hotel Orientation is now complete. Zuikaku, although it's a little belated: Welcome to our Naval District, and let us be in each other's care."

"mm, at that time, without know how, I had already recognized Shoukaku-nee. From here on out, let's take care of each other."

Zuikaku grabbed Shoukaku's hands. For a moment, their gazes crossed--and a moment later burst into inexplicable laughter.

"Ahahaha, I never thought I'd be able to talk to Shoukaku-nee like this. When'd you come here, Shoukaku-nee?"

"About half a year ago. Since then, I've been on the front lines with the main force."

"As expected of Shoukaku-nee! Upholding the name of us Standard Carriers."

"Hmhm, but from here on out it'll be the same for Zuikaku. As long as you put your heart on it, we'll be able to fight shoulder to shoulder again, just like how things were when 'That War' began."

Originally when a warship was complete it went through several months of training, not deploying to the front lines until crew and warship had synchronized. However, Shoukaku and Zuikaku had only just been completed when 'That War' loomed, and they received only a short period of intense training before completing That Fateful First Battle. [\[24\]](#)

However, Zuikaku noticed an issue with Shoukaku's words.

"Well, um....Shoukaku-nee.....I have a bit of a....sensitive question...is it okay if I ask you?"

It seemed as if Shoukaku had noticed too, for, with sincere eyes, she nodded to Zuikaku.

"Mmm. When I first came, I, too, spent several days worrying about who I could talk to."

"Well in that case, I'm going to fire away."

This must be my personality as a shipgirl, Zuikaku thought as she voiced her concern.

"Well, about 'That War'....how'd it end?"

"....."

"I figured Shoukaku-nee already knew--about four months after Shoukaku-nee sank, I fought in the Philippine sea at Cape Engano as bait for their carrier planes. I sank there."

Zuikaku saw those last moments:the pillars of smoke grabbing at the sky; her hull, slowly tilting on the infinite and unforgiving sea; the crew on the decks; and, lastly, the commander, avowed to live and die with his ship.

But her memories of "That War" ended there. What happened at the end was a mystery.

Was it fortune's plan or misfortune's conspiracy that she was born to fight again on this world? This was why she had to know--even if it was just to straighten her thoughts out, she had to know the ending.

And what of the crewmen who had lived, loved and fought for all they loved on her? What finale awaited at the end of "That War," and for what end did we all play our roles with such resolve?

"I won't say anything about being bait, that was a role I had accepted from the start. But, afterwards, in the end...."

"It is as you thought."

Shoukaku's soft words froze Zuikaku's breath in her throat.

"Ah, that's what happened. As I thought, that's what happened..."

First, she felt emptiness--and then an intense sadness that flooded in to fill the gap, seeping through every crevice of her being; and yet, through her tears, Zuikaku saw clearly.

By the time she had sunk, the war had long since become untenable. What would come afterwards had been an open secret long since

shared by every man who still fought. But that was why they--we--had to still fight on. At the very least, that had been the conclusion of most of the seamen....

"Everyone, we worked so hard...what...did we do something wrong....?"

"Zuikaku."

A sudden warmth, as Shoukaku tightly held Zuikaku to her chest.

"It's okay. After 'That War', our nation returned, almost instantly, into a peaceful, wealthy nation once more."

"....."

"I have not completely come to terms with it either. I don't know whether we were in the right or in the wrong during 'That War'. But what I do know is that we have been given a second chance. Another chance to save the helpless.....and, maybe, in the process, save ourselves."

To redeem oneself--for Zuikaku, this would be the new heading.

Even if a warship had been given emotions, she would not have come to this conclusion. It is because we are shipgirls that we think, and therefore we are.

"That's why I won't sink and I damn well won't lose. Zuikaku, you.....you think that as well, right?"

"mmmm...."

Faced with Shoukaku's soft smile, Zuikaku forced a grin.

"Gotta work hard, right....!"

Part 5

In one of the Naval District's annexes/adjoining buildings, there are many rooms that can serve as banquet halls.

Usually, the shipgirls will eat breakfast here or receive training from their senpais.

But today was a little special.

Within the large "Tidal Room" were assembled over a hundred and ten shipgirls. The scene was impressive, and the equally numerous dishes even more so.

On top of the dias, Zuikaku twitched, immobile.

"Alright! Well then, I'm today's 'Cheers! Zuikaku Naval District Enlistment Banquet' MC, Idol of the Fleet, Naka-chang da yo~!
Pleased to meet everyone~!"

With an Idol's appearance and a voice that oozed merriment, the light cruiser Naka pointed the mic at Zuikaku with a practiced hand.

"Well then, although it's a little sudden, could you tell everyone your thoughts and feelings, Zuikaku?"

"M-my...f-feelings?"

Zuikaku responded hesitantly. he had just been led by Shoukaku to her room and was just about to research "this world" when the other shipgirls had barged in, bringing her here.

The other shipgirls had personally made the preparations, all hidden from Zuikaku; in this Naval District it appeared that shipgirls wished to involve and disturb the normal staff in their daily lives as much as possible.

(Pulling this out of the blue, I....!)

The young girl looked at Shoukaku with a pleading gaze--but Shoukaku merely waved cheerily. It seemed as if she had always known and had concealed it from her dear sister.

(Shoukaku-nee~!)

"Heyheyhey, tell us with a S~mile! If you got nothing, then let Naka-chang sing you a song or two~!"

"Girl you've dropped your mixtape more time than we ever cared to hear it, kuma--"

Groans and grumbles flew towards the stage, led by a shipgirl with a strand of hair that might pick up FM--apparently the ligh cruiser Kuma. "Rude~!" Naka retorted angrily.

"W,well then.....I'm the second Aircraft Carrier of the Shoukaku-class, Zuikaku!"

Zuikaku hastily pointed the mic to her mouth, blurting out the first thing that came to mind.

"During 'That War', I had only just been finished when I joined several important battles. Because I was virtually unscathed until the battle of the Marianas, I was called the "Lucky Carrier"....although I only did my best."

That is to say, people once called me this--it was only once "the Lucky Carrier" left her mouth that she realized.

"To be honest, I've barely been a carrier for a day. Everything I've seen and met has been fresh....so, I'm really happy, really excited!"

As over a hundred and ten pairs of eyes centered on Zuikaku, she spotted the Admiral's silhouette from the corner of her eye.

"That's why I, too, want to fight as a shipgirl and protected the world with everybody. From here on out, please take care of me!"

As the rang out, Naka returned to the stage.

"Thank you Naka for your exciting greeting. 'The Lucky Carrier' sure makes me envious! Naka hopes to share a bit of your luck, so she can continue to stand on the center stage! Well then, without further ado, let us raise a glass!"

Ships of the same class--that is, siblings--sat together pouring drinks into neighboring shipgirl's cups.

"Are you ready? Well then, congratulations, Zuikaku! Cheers~!"

With a chorus of "kanpai" and the endless clink of glasses, the banquet began.



In no time at all, the banquet had already gotten under way. Apparently, this welcome banquet was hosted every time a new shipgirl joined the district.

Zuikaku hurriedly greeted the line of shipgirls that came to meet her. Most of them appeared to be cruisers and destroyers, girls her age or younger.

At the side, Shoukaku helped with introductions.

"I-I-I-It's b-been a long time, Zuikaku-onee....!"

Zuikaku had lost count of how many had come--Destroyer Ushio seemed nervous enough for the two of them.

"U,um, thanks for t-taking care of us at the Coral Sea....!"

"Ushio? Uwaahhh~you've become so cute,"

Zuikaku exclaimed.

She had once fought alongside Ushio in the coral sea, the battle that came to be a "the first carrier battle"

"I remember the Coral Sea perfectly. mm. Ushio fought really hard to protect Shoukaku-nee, right? Thanks for that!"

"I-it's nothing! I know that the work for the Carrier onee-sans is much harder....but to hear Zuikaku-onee's praise makes me really happy....."

Ushio flushed red--it seemed she was a shy girl.

Well then, I'm leaving now....Akebono, who also took part in the coral sea, is also here, please take care of us sisters!"

"mmm, pleased to meet you!"

A short little shipgirl dressed in a Kyudo uniform like Zuikaku followed Ushio. Bowing, she knelt politely.

"I'm the light carrier Zuihou, honored to meet you once again."

"Zuihou! You're at this naval district too?"

Zuikaku could not stop herself from seizing Zuihou's hand. From Midway to the Marianas, Zuihou had served with Zuikaku and Shoukaku as a comrade to the new 1stCarDiv. Even if their shared

experiences were limited to the South Pacific, they shared a long history of training together back at home.

Zuihou cracked into an earnest smile.

"Yes! Talking about light carriers, there are a few others, including Sho'ho'-nee."

"Ah, is that so. To be able to fight together again makes me happy! Let's take care of each other!"

"Of course. Also, Zuikaku-nee, there's something I need to tell you in private...."

Zuihou leaned over as she whispered into Zuikaku's ear.

"Be careful of the Admiral. He is not as he seems, he's a depraved, perverse demon!"

"Ah~I've already had a bit of personal experience on that subject..."

Zuikaku eyed the Admiral's seat, nestled in the corner--he seemed to be raising a ruckus with the destroyers Inazuma and Ikazuchi that she had met earlier. His frolics with the childlike shipgirls left a rather dangerous impression.

Zuihou nodded with understanding.

"The point is to be careful. And please warn Shoukaku-nee--the Admiral likes bullying the demure ones the most. If you let him go about his business he gets carried away!"

"I understand, and I'll convey the warning to Shoukaku-nee."

Backing away from Zuikaku, Zuihou saluted.

"Well then, let's get along! Let's go out somewhere to play another day!"

"Thank you, Zuihou!"

Once she had seen Zuihou off, Zuikaku leaned towards Shoukaku.

"Shoukaku-nee, what kind of person is the Admiral," she murmured?

"Eh? Well...."

After considering it a while, Shoukaku responded with some embarrassment.

"He's a good person. He's capable on the battlefield and cares a lot for our well-being and daily lives. If he weren't so...physically friendly, he's a very normal man."

"W,wait a minute! What are you thinking about, Shoukaku-nee!"

"Ah, I guess I'll elaborate a little more. Are all men like that? He frequently waits on the shore with his arm crossed, saying 'flicking a girl's skirt is a real man's duty and romance'...or something like that."

(Shoukaku-nee's been deceived! She's definitely been deceived!)

Zuikaku rubbed her forehead with exasperation. If Shoukaku acted like this, it was likely that countless other shipgirls had also been fooled.

Shoukaku, who did not appear to have noticed her sister's trepidation, straightened up.

"Well then, Zuikaku, there's not much time, let us go and greet our seniors."

"Seniors'...do you mean the ones sitting over there....?"

Looking to the edge of the hall, Zuikaku noted the Battleships and Standard Carriers sitting there. Perhaps it was their status as the main force that gave them their formidable aura.

"Got it. Will you come with me, Shoukaku-nee?"

"Of course."

Zuikaku and Shoukaku started their greetings from the Battleships. Battleships Nagato, Mutsu, Ise, Hyuuga, Fusou, Yamashiro, Battlecruisers Kongou, Hiei, Haruna, Kirishima--in "That World," they were the main force, veterans of a hundred battles [\[25\]](#)

"WOW! Zuikaku, it's been a long time dess--!"

The eldest of the Kongou Sisters boomed happily.

"I was under your care as part of the mobile force! From here on out, I'll be in your care as well!"

"Mm, alright...."

Though Kongou's unexpectedly boisterous response seemed a little suspicious, Zuikaku responded as always. She remembered the Kongou had originally been a British-born Battlecruiser--

And with that, Zuikaku greeted the rest of the battleships one after the other. Each Battleship's appearance and temperament seemed different, just like the other classes

The last were the unfortunate-seeming sisters Fusou and Yamashiro. As she finished her greetings, Zuikaku thought to herself

(As expected, "those two" haven't come.....)

Those two warships, built at the same time as she was and said to be the world's largest and strongest Battleships.

And yet they were not like her--until there remained nothing to win, they saw little action.

(Will we have a chance to meet in the future....?)

"Akagi-senpai, Kaga-senpair, this is my sister Zuikaku, enlisting today."

As she said this, Shoukaku motioned for Zuikaku to kneel in front of the two warships.

Standard Aircraft Carriers Akagi and Kaga formed the two shipgirls of the 1st Carrier Division. The opening strikes of Pearl Harbor; the battles in the South; the Indian Ocean Raid, all the way up to the battle of midway, they had distinguished themselves together.

Akagi and Kaga had both been converted from Battleships [\[26\]](#) into large carriers. As main force of the mobile divisions, their carrier load not long matched, but exceeded that of the Shoukaku class.

To Shoukaku and Zuikaku, these two members of the 1stCarDiv were senpai. In the early battles, the skill and training of the 1stCarDiv far exceeded that of Shoukaku and Zuikaku's 5thCarDiv--you could say they were the two sisters' idol.

"I'm Zuikaku, I'm in your care. It's been a long time, senpai!"

"It has been a long time, Akagi."

Holding a fearsome bowl of rice, Akagi smiled lightly.

"Although it's a rather disconcerting situation, I hope you do your best. I look forwards to you becoming this naval district's main force."

"Thank you, Senpai! I will also work hard to become just like you senpai! Kaga-senpai, I'm in your care!"

「.....」[\[27\]](#)

Having listened to Zuikaku, Kaga silently finished her wine.
Zuikaku blinked in expectation of Kaga's response.

--After some ten seconds, Kaga sighed.

"Zuikaku, I have a question to ask you, is that alright?"

"Y-yes?"

"What exactly do you mean by 'just like us'?"

Kaga had not yet even looked at Zuikaku--but, oblivious, Zuikaku answered frankly.

"Yes. I hope to learn to be like Akagi-senpai and Kaga-senpai and become an experienced main force for the fleet!"

"So you're saying that you can catch up to us with a bit of experience?"

"Yes! And we have memories of 'That War,' up until near the end. As long as we learn from our mistakes, we'll be able to.....!"

"Is that so? Don't compare us with you lot."

Kaga's ice-cold response seemed to have turned the thermostat down a few degrees or ten.

Zuikaku, too, froze on the spot. After a brief silence, she spoke up timidly.

"...what are you saying?"

"I am saying, do not speak of your 5thCarDiv and us as if we are the same."

If it was chilly before it was arctic now--thankfully, only a few had heard Kaga's words, and the banquet continued unabated.

"Akagi and I, and our 1stCarDiv, are not like your 5thCarDiv. You can work as hard as you'd like and you'd never catch up to us, so don't lump us together with you."

"Kaga....!"

Akagi hurriedly [\[28\]](#) moved to stop Kaga, but Zuikaku was already shaking, her face red.

(This is just her shitting on me.....!)

"Although you say that, senpai...."

Zuikaku eyed Kaga squarely, her voice soft but furious.

"Compared to you Dear Senpai, we don't stand a chance....but, after 'that tragedy', we stopped being the 5thCarDiv. We became a new 1stCarDiv, and we fought as hard as anyone!"

That tragedy, of course, was the Battle of Midway. The Navy's four jewels--Kaga, Akagi, Souryuu and Hiryuu, were all sunk--a battle which could not be called anything but tragedy.

Shoukaku and Zuikaku were some of the few carriers not to be involved. After that, they had taken on the mantle of teh 1stCarDiv and experienced days of both Glory and Suffering.

Zuikaku was not glad for that tragedy--but to her, memories of taking on the mantle of the new 1stCarDiv were her pride. The name of the 1stCarDiv didn't simply belong to Akagi and Kaga. The name of the 5thCarDiv, for her, was simply a single part of her life--

However, Kaga shook her head.

"You, in your current form, do not even deserve to speak that name--you can be the 5thCarDiv forever. The Glory of the 1stCarDiv belongs to me and Akagi [\[29\]](#)"

".....! You take things too far. Please control your words!"

"I have no plans to control them for someone so far away from us. Of course, the sisters in the 2ndCarDiv over there are also nothing like you."

Sitting at Kaga's side, sisters Souryuu and Hirayuu watched the two indecisively.

"But....!"

"Well then, do you want to try it out?"

Kaga changed the topic.

"Tomorrow, in the practice waters, you and me. Stand in front of me until the end, and I will recognize your resolve. Of course, we'll use the same planes. It's a little unfair due to the skill difference, but I can't promise you a handicap...."

Kaga spoke as if victory was already assured--Zuikaku felt her blood boil.

Shoukaku hurried stepped between the two.

"Senpai, Zuikaku just joined this naval district....she doesn't even know how to fight as a shipgirl!"

"This is not your business. I was talking to Zuikaku."

Senpai....!"

"I get it."

Zuikaku spoke bluntly.

"Zuikaku accepts this contest."

Part 6

The sun had yet to rise, and the practice waters remained in a mist of murky blue.

It was on this scene that Zuikaku and Kaga faced each other silently. Separated by several hundred meters, they were watched from a distance by several shipgirls, serving as witnesses.

"A battle between the new and old 1stCarDiv, huh--"

Kongou stood, arms crossed in front of her as she remarked with a leisurely voice.

"But for a seasoned veteran like Kaga to take on a rookie like Zuikaku...isn't this a bit of a foregone conclusion, Kirishima?"

"As Onee-sama said, Zuikaku stands no chance."



Standing next to Kongou, Kirishima nodded.

"Kaga and Akagi are among the Naval District's strongest Standard Carriers. If it's just Zuikaku, she can't possibly win...once this is over, Zuikaku's probably going to be a step away from sinking on the ground."

"And yet in spite of this, Zuikaku wants to fight. Why is that--?"

"My guess is that she wants to show her senpai her resolve,"

Shoukaku replied, her voice laden with unease.

"Even if she wins, she wants to get a good hit in. Zuikaku can accept being weaker, but she can't accept being belittled. After all, I, too, am the 1stCarDiv' was what she said. She probably can't accept the situation."

"She's quite the opposite of Shoukaku!"

"Did you teach her Carrier Combat?"

Kirishima looked to Shoukaku for confirmation.

Yes. Surface movement, carrier launch and recovery, the limited period available for a carrier's attack group to form up and for the carrier to launch, I've taught her that and most of the basics."

"Drills use simulated ammunition, so they won't be hurt. Don't worry--!"

As Kongou spoke, Shoukaku's gaze turned to the distance.

Akagi and several other shipgirls watched Zuikaku and Kaga, just as she did.

Shoukaku spotted the outlines of destroyers Yukikaze and Hibiki. Normally, these two had little to do with the Shoukaku sisters.

(.....as expected, that's how it is.)

Shoukaku sighed as she realized her counterpart's intentions. Changing tack, she looked once more towards Zuikaku and Kaga.

With an imposing voice, Akagi spoke, her words a decree.

"The practice match between Zuikaku and Kaga hereby--begins! "



As Akagi's voice rang out, Kaga raised her longbow and Zuikaku her shortbow, both letting loose into the sky.

"First Wave, launch!"

"I will not give up here."

The first wave of attack planes, having assembled in the sky, launched towards their targets.

(Anyhow, I, too, am a carrier of the main force....fuck survival, son, we in it to win it!)

The attack planes passed over her. The unit consisted of Type 21 Carrier Fighters, Type 99 Carrier Dive-Bombers, and Type 97 Torpedo Bombers, roughly 20 of each.

Watching them, Zuikaku raised her fist in a silent vow.

(There's a huge gap in skill between Kaga-senpai and I.....but I have the experience of 'That War'!"

"Carrier Planes, transition into the Crane Wing formation!"

Acknowledging Zuikaku's order, her attack team formed into a triangle, Zeroes in the center and the Type 99s and Type 97s at the flanks.

After the Battle of Midway, the Crane Wing formation had been developed and practiced by the New 1stCarDiv in order to defeat enemy carriers. With this formation, the fleet's bombers could envelope the enemy carrier between the three corners without complex maneuvers and rapidly transition into an attack from both sides. This was the trump card of the 1stCarDiv, developed after they no longer overestimated the enemy.

And Zuikaku's belief in her chances came from this tactic.

(If I use this formation, even Kaga-senpai....!)

On the other hand, Kaga's attack force maintained a standard formation, with air superiority fighters leading the van.

The two forces of Zeroes clashed--

".....! How?!"

"They're all good kids."

Zuikaku's distressed shout was met by Kaga's pleased mutter--
Zuikaku's attack force was devastated by Kaga's zeroes, the individual planes plummeting as their formation crumpled.
Zuikaku's Zeroes fought courageously, but with little effect.

"Why.....?"

"Unlike you, I mounted about 40 Zeroes."

Zuikaku's eyes widened at Kaga's calm response.

"40.....! Isn't that half the carrier complement?"

"One of our mistakes in that battle was that we emphasized attack power. I will not repeat that mistake."

Zuikaku had no retort. In a way, this battle proved that it was Kaga who had learned more from past mistakes. Kaga's confidence and arrogance were not mere words--

Zuikaku's attack planes broke through Zuikaku's formation and zeroed [\[30\]](#) in on Zuikaku. Though some of Zuikaku's bombers also broke through towards Kaga, their number was far smaller. Kaga casually evaded them.

(What am I going to do....? Well, there's only one thing....!)

"Damn---!"

Kaga's bombers attacked in series. With a shout, Zuikaku launched into evasive maneuvers. The Shipgirls' outfits allowed the wearer to move unaffected by the weight of the equipment, and Zuikaku's equipment was no exception.

As the plumes and pillars of water vanished, a lightly damaged Zuikaku emerged in front of everyone.

".....!"

Zuikaku's face was distorted in pain. Though she was aware that this was simply the effect of the simulated shells and bore no pernanet damage, she also realized she had been plunged into an incredibly disadvantageous position.

The remnants of the 1st Attack Group limped back belatedly, less than half of those that had left. And yet, she would have to reform these survivors and quickly launch a second wave.

(But Kaga-senpai's AA is superior to mine.... [31] Can I even hit her.....?)

"Even so.....!"

Zuikaku raised her shorbow once more, launching her remaining attack planes. Kaga, too, launched her attack planes with factory precision. If she could not at least do some damage to Kaga and weaken her launch capacity, she'd just be a sitting duck.

But the first carrier whose planes formed up was Kaga. The attack teams came relentlessly, charging at Zuikaku's only just-consolidated air complement.

".....ugh, fast!"

Out of formation, her own attack team was devastated.

Next, Kaga's bombers once more flew at Zuikaku, hurling their bombs and torpedos--though Zuikaku did her best to evade, she was not wholly successful, and the damage began to mount.

"Ahhh....!"

Aching all over, Zuikaku could not help falling ot her knees.

She had probably reached medium damage--fairly severe. Just one more attack, and she'd definitely keel over with major damage.

(How....so easily....!)

Was the difference between her and Kaga too large? Zuikaku could taste regret on her tongue.

"It's just like shooting turkeys.....3rd wave, prepare to launch."

Kaga spoke softly, but loudly enough for the words to strike Zuikaku a mortal blow. Zuikaku could hear the provocation. Shooting turkeys, the 火雞射擊 [32].....that was how the enemy had referred to Zuikaku's attack planes as they fell one after the other in an ill-advised and ill-prepared tragedy.

Biting her lip, Zuikaku stood up shakily. Even so, she knew her body was at its limit. With the exception of the zeroes she used for defense, most of her complement was gone.

(At this rate, I'll be ruined. But, what should I do....?)

"Zuikaku."

Suddenly, Kaga spoke more loudly, a certain vicious glint in her eyes.

"The next attack will not be with practice rounds. These will be real bombs and real torpedos. If you don't dodge, then you will really sink."

Zuikaku gaped. Shoukaku and the audience's eyes widened. This had never been mentioned before the practice round--

"If you don't want to sink, then exert all possible powers of the 5thCarDiv, and dodge!"

"Kaga-senpai, hold on!"

Shoukaku yelled desperately:

"Zuikaku is my dearly beloved sister, and newly reunited family! Please, restrain yourself! Even if Zuikaku is the 'lucky carrier,' this....!"

"Mind your own business."

"Senpai!"

Shoukaku looked to Akagi--but Akagi said nothing as she stared at Kaga and Zuikaku. It seemed like these events were in her calculations.

With all the strength she could muster, Zuikaku stood up. And yet, the weight of hopeless threatened to bend her over once again.

(Is that to say, I'm going to sink here.....? I'd only just started walking this new road and met Shoukaku-nee.....)

Maybe this was alright, Zuikaku thought to herself. After all, she had no duty to this world. Yesterday's events could just be a dream-

-

In front of her, Kaga's attack team had already formed up and were moving in. At this rate, they would be in range within moments.

(So it's over....)

And yet, as she felt the hopelessness permeate here, Zuikaku noticed something.

Beads of sweat congealed on Kaga's forehead. Her expression, too, showed exhaustion.

It seemed like she had thrown her all into this last attack. That is, Kaga had also seriously took on this battle.

(Why...? At this point I'm just a target waiting to sink....?)

A second later, Kaga's words floated through Zuikaku's mind.

(To exert all the powers of the 5th CarDiv....what did Kaga-senpai mean by that? Is there something else I can do?)

What is that--Zuikaku felt she knew the answer, what Kaga had been thinking of.

Everything that could be done--this was like the uphill struggle following midway, when she had thrown everything into a fight for survival.

After Midway, they could not be arrogant again. They had tried everything and anything they could--not just countless upgrades to AA, but aircrew training and research into carrier doctrine and tactics.

Most importantly, the Shoukaku-class the most advanced propulsion system of all the IJN carriers, capable not only of over 34 knots and complex maneuvers, but also the greatest endurance. From destroyer Ushio's reports, a damaged Shoukaku had managed to reach 40 knots [\[33\]](#) in the South Pacific.

Speed had been the trump card, for herself and her sister Shoukaku, seen in multiple battles. At the Marianas she had dodged gunfire to become known as the "lucky carrier," all because of this ability.

Even if it was based on this one point, Shoukaku and Zuikaku were much different from the other carriers. The 5thCarDiv--the new 1stCarDiv had used different tactics from either the 1st and 2ndCarDivs and survived the countless carrier battles that followed the Battle of Midway--

(Not like the 1stCarDiv, and not like the 2ndCarDiv.....?)

Zuikaku's opened her eyes with a new understanding.

Why had Kaga provoked her? Why did she arrange this battle? Was there something she wanted to say? Why did she force herself to her limits, to this situation--

("Don't compare us with the 5thCarDiv"--she must have meant that we would have to use our own way of fighting in this war; it was so we wouldn't be constrained by the name of the New 1stCarDiv, so we would not be lulled into carelessness....!)

The type 99 Bombers had already began prepping, while the Type 97 had dropped to low altitude in preparation for the torpedo attack. At this rate she would be targetted by the mass fire.

And yet there was no longer confusion or uncertainty in Zuikaku's heart. If Kaga had done all she could to throw out Zuikaku's way of thinking, then she, too--

".....! Right, bring it on!"

Putting all her strength in her legs, Zuikaku bellowed at the sky--

"I am the 2nd Aircraft Carrier of the Shoukaku-class, Zuikaku! Just a single carrier wants to take me down? Bring it on, I'll dodge it all!"

No more mindless dodging--she would use her specialty, she would use her caution, she would use her guts, and she could evade; if she did it right, she would make it. Kaga must have believed that too--

"The Shoukaku class....the 'lucky Carrier'....this is what we're made of.....!"

"Zuikaku.....!"

The sound of the propellers of the nearing enemy planes, Shoukaku's shout, the sound of the waves--they all blended together, and yet Zuikaku heard them all as she waited for the planes to come.



Zuikaku saw everything that moment.

The bombers dropped their torpedos and bombs, as if to surround Zuikaku with their firepower--seconds later, the explosions began. Of course, they covered Zuikaku's silhouette.

"Zui....kaku...."

Shoukaku watched in awe

As an onlooker, Shoukaku ah thought she had understood Kaga's intentions. After all, she had made a similar mistake when she had just joined up--thankfully,Kaga and Akagi had corrected her.

And yet, the use of real ammunition had exceeded her expectations and caused her to try to step in. She had failed, however, and Kaga had launched the attack she had promised against the wounded and exhausted Zuikaku.

Cold shivers ran down Shoukaku's spine. If her beloved sister Zuikaku really died on the battlefield.....

Shoukaku waited for the smoke and foam to dissipate in silence. Kaga watched as well, as did Akagi, Hibiki, Yukikaze and the others, all gazing seriously.

A moment later, Shoukaku saw a shipgirl standing among the black smoke.

"Zuikaku....!"

Instantly, the shouts of relief and joy filled the battlefield.



"Whoo, jesus, fuck....! [\[34\]](#)"

Zuikaku was soaked with seafoam, but she was still standing.

As soon as the attack had began, the girl had used her specialty to continuously evade for well over half a minute [\[35\]](#). She had survived. And yet, her feelings had not yet caught up.

"I made it....right...."

Near collapse, Zuikaku gazed across the ocean--in the distance, her sister Shoukaku and the otehrs were cheering. Akagi, as well, was smiling slightly. Though Hibiki and Yukikaze at Akagi's side bore more complicated expressions, both looked like they had just relaxed.

And then, without noticing it, her eyes fell on Kaga in front of her--

"You actually dodged it. Even I could not being impressed."

Kaga looked no different from usual.

"Though they were actually just practice rounds....well, you've got a pair of good legs."

"T-those were practice rounds?"

Zuikaku blinked. Though Kaga had said they were real shells, they were simply practice rounds.

It seemed she had done it to make Zuikaku get serious--Shoukaku, too, appeared to have heard, her expression blank.

"Regardless, you have round this round. Therefore, I will concede the point and recognize you as 'the future Main Force of the Naval District.'"

Kaga spoke with her usual expressionless voice, but Zuikaku shook her head.

"No, I, too, feel that I am not yet ready."

「.....」

"Take the compliment you ungrateful cunt, they don't come cheap."

"I could only safely evade those attacks because Kaga-senpai taught me a new way of fighting and a new way of thinking. It was senpai who taught me that holding onto names of the past in this world is only a step away from arrogance....that's why I will continue to work hard under your guidance."

"Then, you will no longer cling onto the name of the 1stCarDiv?"

Kaga asked for confirmation. Zuikaku nodded.

"If I hold onto that name and all the feelings behind it, I'll just keep thinking I won't lose to anyone. But on this world, Kaga-senpai and Akagi-senpai are still senpai, and we are who we are--so the 5thCarDiv is fine. From here on out, please take care of Shoukaku-nee and my 5thCarDiv!"

"....then I will look forwards to it."

As she finished, Kaga turned away from the bowing Zuikaku and left. Though Kaga's voice had been the usual cold emptiness, Zuikaku knew that this had been Kaga's greatest praise yet.

Next up, Shoukaku and company were now running over. The sun, too, finally rose on the east, its rays reaching across the horizon and dying Zuikaku and company a deep red.

Hearing her comrades calling her name, Zuikaku gripped tightly on her shortbow as she made a new resolution.

(I will become a Fleet Carrier who can fight alongside Akagi-senpai, Kaga-senpai, and Shoukaku-nee to save this world. That's why....I'll move forwards with full power!)

Under the rising sun, Zuikaku turned her head towards the ever-brightening sky.

The Trial Seas

Part 1

5 days after Zuikaku and Kaga's face-off, the gate of the Naval District was shrouded in the morning mist.

The outside air was chilly, as would be expected of the early winter. Embracing their winter baldness, the trees covered the ground underfoot with their cast-off crimson leaf toupees. The sun had not yet risen, and the last fingers of the previous night gamely struggled on.

"Uuuu~as cold as always....!"

No sooner had Zuikaku left the main gate had she found herself incapable of resisting a shiver, her breath forming a white cloud in front of her. Her combat uniform left much to be desired when it came to warming her legs.

"It's not that big a deal, but I could really do with Kaga-senpai's stockings right now..."

"We can't show weaknesses, Zuikaku."

Shoukaku, following behind her, seemed the same as always.

"Acclimatizing to the cold is a type of training as well....who knows, one day we may have to fight on battlefields even colder than this."

"Even colder? The Aleutians were bad enough..."

After Midway, Zuikaku and the Light Carriers Ryuujou and Zuihou had went together to the North to support the Aleutian Islands operation.

Hearing Zuikaku's complaints, Shoukaku laughed lightly before continuing.

"Plus, you wouldn't want to embarrass yourself in front of those children, right?"

"Good morning! Shoukaku-nee, Zuikaku-nee!"

With a bit of effort, the main gate was pulled upon, and from inside came several little shipgirls.

Fubuki, Isonami, Miyuki--all Destroyer-type shipgirls of the Fubuki class. All three wore their combat uniforms in the winter wind, just like Shoukaku and Zuikaku. It seemed that they had free time today--expedition duty and breakfast duty had both been assigned to others.

The Fubuki-class was the first of the so-called "special-type" destroyers, carrying armament and having range unparalleled by other ships of their class and generation. There were many shipgirls of this class and its derivatives in the Naval District--it was almost as if they were the District's Mascots.

The one who had greeted the two was Fubuki. Well-suited to the role of name-ship, she served as the leader to the other shipgirls of her class.

"Seems like some great weather, huh? Let's train early and hard today as well!"

"Eh? Uh, yeah....."

Zuikaku forced a grin. In spite of their thin clothing, the destroyers were full of vigor, and Fubuki was no exception.

From the day after the face-off with Kaga, Zuikaku had taken up daily jogs as morning training like what Shoukaku had suggested.

Though Zuikaku was not quite sure whether there would be any effect, it had been her sister Shoukaku's suggestion, thus, she had taken up that suggestion without much thought.

For the destroyers, the morning jog appeared to be a morning routine, and so Zuikaku and Shoukaku regularly bumped into them.

Under Shoukaku's past five days of tutelage (a combination of indoor tutoring and outdoor training) Zuikaku's skills had improved dramatically, such that she could now do long-distance cruises. Today's schedule was a morning jog and breakfast, followed by standard training.

According to Shoukaku, the order for Zuikaku to join the front lines would come within a few days.

As per the agreement with the Admiral, this order originally constituted the final stretch of the two-week trial period in which Zuikaku decided whether she wanted to serve as a shipgirl. However, Zuikaku's training had long since outpaced the plans for the original trial period, and so the test had been moved up.

After some stretches, Fubuki spoke to Zuikaku and Shoukaku excitedly

"Well, we're off! Earnest training brings an empty stomach and a tastier breakfast!"

With that, Fubuki charged off without waiting for a response. Picking up their equipment, the other shipgirls followed

"They sure are lively for such cold weather...."

Zuikaku's dumbfounded whisper was met with another tinkling laugh from Shoukaku and a rather admiring response.

"Those children may not fight at the very front like we do, but they more than make up for it serving as escorts, transporting supplies, and rescuing civilians. In a certain sense, their battles are even rougher than ours..."

"Ah, so it's like that here to...."

Zuikaku nodded in understanding.

In "That War", the diminutive destroyers were known as the "rickshaw drivers".^[36] And yet once the tides of war had changed for the worse, they became the main characters in a war of attrition, working with a diligence and vigor that rivaled the main force.

The shipgirls, too, had inherited this kind of soul--

"Well then let's go, Zuikaku."

"mm!"

They couldn't embarrass themselves in front of those children--feeling the weight of Shoukaku's words, Zuikaku also launched into a run.

The jogging route passed through the small port town that neighbored the Naval District. Under the morning sun, the shipgirls run along the town's protective seawall.

Various scenes and objects flew past--the town, dyed in the morning sun; the seagulls, dancing in the sky; the countless fishing boats squeaking, whistling and jostling as they went out to work;

the tide, advancing and then retreating from the beaches. In Zuikaku's warship days, these scenes had existed as well.

"Now that I think about it, why does everyone wear their equipment?"

Zuikaku inquired, slightly out of breath. After all, if it was jogging, why not change into something more fitting?

Running alongside her, Fubuki responded with a serious face.

"Morning exercise is a type of combat training too! If we're dressed like we are on the battlefield we can get a little more hype! Also..."

"Also?"

Fubuki's smile looked a little awkward this time around.

"The Commander said that 'this is cuter! All you cute girls running shoulder to shoulder like that makes the perfect kodak moment'...."

(T-that man.....!)

Zuikaku put a hand to her forehead. The "Commander" Fubuki mentioned, of course, was the Admiral. Quite a few shipgirls preferred to refer to him that way.

Zuikaku had already heard tales of the Admiral's sexual harassment exploits many times already.

Given the chance, the man would readily and brazenly peek under skirts, rub heads and touch equipment without a second thought.

Luckily, Zuikaku had not yet been a target of these things--perhaps a legacy of their first meeting.

"Ah, but it does have its perks. Look!"

Fubuki hurriedly pointed in front of her.

Countless shoppers, commuters and students walked on the road along the seawall. Almost all of them waved to the shipgirls, their eyes glowing with familiarity. Among them were elementary schoolers and preschoolers, raucously cheering the shipgirls on with shouts of "Shipgirl Onee-sans, good luck!", "Don't lose to the Abyssals" and the like.

The Destroyers, in turn, eagerly returned their waves. Laughing gently, Shoukaku followed in elegant fashion--as did Zuikaku, albeit with some hesitation.

Once the greetings had largely ended, Fubuki spoke.

"We can't live the same way as the civilians. The Naval District hasn't had many visitors since opening day either, so being able to meet and talk to everyone like this is really precious."

"Sometimes they even give us snacks or drinks~!"

Catching up from behind, Miyuki joined into the conversation with a grin. At her side, an embarrassed Isonami spoke up:

"We normally go out without our equipment in order to avoid attracting attention, so we don't often get the chance to show everyone that we're shipgirls..."

With a satisfied expression, she continued.

"Plus, thanks to our convoys, supplies have been able to come in from the Continent. Now the convenience stores and supermarkets have stuff packed again, and the smiles are back on everyone's faces.....seeing everyone happy makes me happy as well."

During indoor studies, Zuikaku had heard that the appearance of the abyssals had occurred a decade ago; the world before that had been largely at peace for some time, interrupted by a few disputes at best. It was in this time that the convenience store, supermarket, the cell phone and other aspects of modern culture had developed.

While this culture had been momentarily threatened by the abyssals, the arrival and battles of the shipgirls had returned some semblance of the prewar status quo to this nation, at least--

"I see...."

Zuikaku nodded, feeling that she now understood why the Admiral had wanted everyone to keep their equipment on.

(At least this way these kids can get praised.)

These efforts perhaps allowed the destroyers, used to fighting in thankless silence, to witness the results of their hard work .

This was especially true for the Fubuki-class and their predecessors, whose glories in combat were often stolen by the newer and more advanced Kagerou-class, among others.

(As expected of the admiral.....on the other hand, is it that hard for him just to praise them honestly?)

Zuikaku smiled wryly. Regardless of the real reason, the saying that "the Admiral is a hard guy to understand" remained as true as always.

"Eh, but beautiful girls like us could catch everyone's attention, even without our equipment...."

"Murakumo, that's a little...."

Hearing the Fubuki-class' only futuristic-looking shipgirl Murakumo's statement, Shirayuki smiled awkwardly. The other members of the Fubuki-class seemed to share their sentiment.

"....speaking of which, why were we all born with the appearance of girls?"

Murakumo's musings had aroused a question from Zuikaku, who spoke before she could restrain herself. Smiling lightly, Shoukaku responded,

"Those who live on the seas pray to a deity 'Spirit of the Ships' for safety, and apparently it takes the form of a girl. Perhaps that is why we appear with this appearance, or perhaps that is simply one of many reasons. Of course, this is all just speculation...."

"Eh, that might not be that bad a way of thinking about it."

Zuikaku muttered, satisfied. Shoukaku, however, closed her mouth with a complicated expression.

By the time they had finished their jog and returned to the naval district, the sun had already risen, dispelling the last vestiges of the morning mist.

"Whew....it really isn't that bad once you do it every morning..."

Burning all over, Zuikaku fanned herself with her hand. Shoukaku came over, carrying several towels.

Several tiny fairies surrounded them, seemingly having helped Shoukaku out.

Zuikaku had no clue where these fairies came from--all she knew was that quite a few of these inhabited the Naval District. They

helped the shipgirls with daily chores and manned some of the equipment in battle.

"Here, Shoukaku, a towel. Shipgirls can apparently get sick too, so make sure you wipe yourself dry."

"Ah, thank you, Shoukaku-nee!"

"Same goes for everyone. And don't forget to finish your stretches."

"Yeah~!" The destroyers responded loudly as they took towels from Shoukaku's hand. Shoukaku smiled, a caring mother surrounded by her children.

Zuikaku secretly admired her sister's thoughtfulness as well.

(As expected, Shoukaku-nee is nothing like me...)

Speaking of which, she had heard that Shoukaku had come half a year ago to the Naval District.

While it was unclear when the shipgirl's part of the war had began, the respect shown by the destroyers to Shoukaku suggested that she was one of the first to heed the call.

(sure is impressive....)

Thinking this, Zuikaku walked to the main gate--

".....!"

A breath behind her--shocked, Zuikaku turned--to see several carrier planes charging at her. Zuikaku subconsciously turned aside--it might not be a crash, but better safe than sorry..

Hearing Shoukaku's "are you alright, Zuikaku!", Zuikaku scanned her surroundings.

"Who goes there? To just attack someone out of the blue like that....out with you!"

"Not bad. As expected of the carrier recognized by Kaga-senpai--but that's no reason to get overconfident!"

From the Naval District's rooftop rang a resounding voice, and Zuikaku immediately looked up.

In her vision loomed a shipgirl, standing on the rooftop with arms crossed. Several carrier planes lay on her head--but not a type Zuikaku had seen before. Rather than Zuikaku and Shoukaku's archery uniforms, hers resembled that of an Onmyoji. The hooked jewel on her breast was especially eyecatching.

Her flight deck, meanwhile, was not a shoulder guard such as Zuikaku's, but a roll-out scroll. Additionally, several vaguely plane-shaped pieces of paper lay on the scroll. Given the onmyoji getup, those carrier planes were probably shikigami.

"You are....?"



"From here on out, I, Izum--rather, I, Hiyou, will instruct you in the place of the Senpai of the 1stCarDiv. Prepare yourself! I'm quite good!"

"'Hiyou' was that light carrier, right....? And anyway, don't fuck up your own name if you're going to make an entrance like that!"

Zuikaku could not help a snarky retort. From behind Hiyou, another carrier shipgirl interjected with a wry laugh.

"I try to remind you every time, but you keep on forgetting. 's it because you're still that lil' Ojou-sama from back then?"

"S-shut up, Junyou! Anyway, the Admiral has instructed me to teach you.....so you'd better prepare yourself!"

"Ahh, what she's trying to say is that 'even though I haven't been at the Naval District long either, I, too, was also a part of the main force after Midway, so let's get along', or something like that~"

"Really now, Junyou! I pull off this stylish introduction and then you go and mess it up!"

Unimpressed, Junyou chuckled mockingly as Hiyou retorted. As for Shoukaku and Zuikaku, they could only watch wordlessly, reduced to spectators in this heated exchange.

Part 2

"Today we're going to wrap up training with a Fleet Exercise."

Shoukaku traversed the surface of the waters around the Naval District as she explained to Zuikaku.

Having finished their afternoon indoor lessons and lunch, the two headed towards the Practice Waters.

Under a barren and cloudless sky, the seas murmured with a tranquility that was a little unusual for the winter. In the distance one could see the shoreline surrounding the Naval District and the woody mountains that lay behind it.

"These so-called fleet exercises are basically just a battle between shipgirls, right? Like my battle with Kaga-senpai earlier?"

"That's right. However, this battle will be a battle between fleets. After all, we carriers can only reach our true potential with other ships."

Zuikaku nodded in understanding.

Aircraft carriers formed an impressive attack force, capable of using their planes to strike far beyond the reach of Battleships and Heavy Cruisers. Defensively, however, carrier armor could not even match that of the Heavy Cruisers--a single hit could well spell disaster.

Shoukaku, Zuikaku and the other carriers had inherited these strengths and weaknesses. As such, working with the fleet escorts was a matter of life and death for a carrier.

"Firstly, gun fire is absolutely indispensable when it comes to defending against air attacks. Secondly, battles with the abyssals usually lead to us closing to shelling distance by the time we launch our second wave. As a result, we often find ourselves under fire in the thick of battle."

"That's why it's important to work with the other shipgirls..."

"Mmm. The maximum size of a fleet here is six ships. You could say that teamwork has become even more important than it was in 'That War.'"

Only six shipgirls could engage in a battle at once--it seemed that the abyssals were capable of detecting larger fleets by some yet-unknown method, savaging it with constant ambushes. Perhaps of this, however, the abyssal fleets also never exceeded six ships in size.

"Moreover, the abyssals also integrate carriers into their striking forces, forming carrier task forces and using formations just like us. As such, Exercises between carrier forces is the best training for the real battle."

"That's really kind of unpleasant..."

Zuikaku voiced her feelings frankly. The Admiral's words on her first day, and those days studying the various abyssal types during indoor lessons had burned themselves into her mind.

"The same ship classes, the tactics, the same mode of warfare--it's as if...."

"As if they were vengeful spirits made in our image?"

Shoukaku's probing inquiry was met with a nod from the stiff-faced Zuikaku.

If the abyssals were theoretically a similar type of existence to the shipgirls, then they must be all the rage, regret, despair and negativity from 'That War,' incarnated in human form in this world...

"As the Admiral said, we have virtually no understanding of the shipgirls. For all we know, they may simply be a case of convergent evolution, completely inhuman organisms whose development has given them a coincidental resemblance to the weapons of man.

In other words, Shoukaku was saying that there was no point in dwelling on the unknown.

"Regardless, what is true is that we cannot communicate with them, and so we must fight. Each Abyssal is quite strong, and their numbers are virtually unlimited--only a fool would drop their guard around them."

Zuikaku felt herself stiffen.

A battle against an unending enemy. This was not like "That War"--there was no negotiation or arbitration, but a war whose end could only via complete annihilation of one side.

(Against an enemy such as this, there was no option but to train for endless war.)

The battle with Kaga from several days past floated into her mind. Perhaps it was Kaga's awareness of the cruelty of this war that she had fought so hard to point out Zuikaku's carelessness.

(If that's the case, then what was that thing with Hiyou about....?)

As Junyou had said, the two carriers of the Hiyou-class had accolades and achievements that compared with those of the Shoukaku-class.

Although they had been a second-line unit at Midway, they had been forced to fill the shoes of the four carriers in its aftermath, serving in various carrier battles.

According to Zuikaku's own memories and a few statements from Shoukaku, Hiyou had sunk in the Marianas, while Junyou had survived "That War."

(Given, the two of them were also part of the Post-Midway striking force just like me, so maybe they're in a similar position...)

Regardless of Hiyou's claims of "orders from the Admiral," it seemed that she had acted of her own volition, perceiving Zuikaku as a rival.

Hiyou's attitude was probably because of her past as a former luxury liner. But even so....

(I'm glad that she's willing to guide me, but that tacky senpai act.....)

"Zuikaku, there's our escorts."

From the direction SHoukaku indicated came the outlines of four shipgirls. They met in no time.

"We'll be in each other's care today, Sisters of the 5thCarDiv."

Heavy cruiser Tone regarded the two. Next to her was Chikuma of the same class as well as the destroyers Yukikaze and Makigumo.

"We've covered the 1stCarDiv and the 2ndCarDiv a few times, but this'll be our first time protecting the 5thCarDiv. But now that I'm here, you won't have to worry about finding the enemy y'know [37]!"

"Very well, we look forwards to your exploits."

Shoukaku smiled gently. Zuikaku, too, felt a little reassured.

Tone and Chikuma had been the most advanced Heavy Cruiser of "That War." Mounting multiple scout planes on their backs, they had distinguished themselves on multiple battlefields as the fleet's

eyes. For the purposes of carrier task force battles, they were the perfect match for the 5thCarDiv.

"Carrier Battles are all about getting the first strike and restraining the enemy carrier's movements. As such, I'll make sure to look extra careful. The attacking's going to be up to you, though, y'know."

"Alright. Chikuma, Yukikaze, Makigumo, we'll be in your care as well."

"Of course. I ask that you all take care of my elder sister and I."

"U-understood! Yukikaze will give it her best!"

"Me too, uh, I'll do my best!"

The three shipgirls each responded differently in turn. A thought suddenly intruded into Zuikaku's mind.

(During the battle with Kaga-senpai, Yukikaze had been with Akagi-senpai....was she watching?)

"It's asking a little much of everyone when we've just met, but the Fleet Exercise is about to begin."

Shoukaku spoke with a hint of worry.

"I don't know the enemy's makeup--but since their goal is to train us, it's most likely a carrier task force...we can't let our guard down!"

"Understood!"

"I, Shoukaku, will serve as the flagship. Please act by my orders--if we are to win over the overwhelming numbers of the abyssals, we

will need to trust each other and fight as one. Don't act on your own! Tone and Chikuma, please launch your recon seaplanes and search for the enemy!"

"Understood! Let's go, Chikuma!"

"Yes, Tone nee-san!"

Tone and Chikuma pointed the catapults on their right arms towards the heavens, launching their seaplanes into the sky in series.

"Yukikaze, Makigumo, you guys will be vanguard, with Tone and Chikuma taking the flanks. Form up in wheel formation and keep your eyes out for the enemy. Zuikaku, stay by my side. The carriers are the core of the fleet--regardless of your vigor or enthusiasm, avoid waiting in the front."

"Understood!"

Zuikaku watched by Shoukaku's side. The other shipgirls followed Shoukaku's orders, forming up quickly into the wheel formation a doughnut of escorts surrounding the center ships in an anti-air formation as they advanced.

(As expected of Shoukaku-nee....!)

Zuikaku watched Shoukaku as she shot out her orders. That practice confidence was exceptional, as was the way the other shipgirls obeyed wordlessly and perfectly with complete trust.

"....! Enemy detected, shoukaku! 20 degrees to starboard, distance 500, coming from behind that island! Two carriers, four other ships!"

"Shoukaku-san, attack force, coming from the starboard side! Over a hundred of them!"

All this came from the scout planes.

"An ambush from behind the island? Not a bad plan--all ships, adjust course twenty degrees to starboard! Zuikaku, let's get in there!"

"Yes, Shoukaku-nee! 1st Wave, away!"

Shoukaku and Zuikaku loosed their arrows into the sky. The arrows instantly burst into carrier planes, multiple for each arrow as they began to form up. It was fortunate that they had detected the enemy before they had struck--with this forewarning, there would probably enough time to form up and charge the enemy fleet.

Zuikaku and Shoukaku's planes were all Type 21 Zeroes, Type 99 Dive Bombers and Type 97 Torpedo Bombers--all early war fighters.

"Fleet Exercise opponent--Enemy detected!"

From the front, vanguard Makigumo shouted her warning. Zuikaku and Shoukaku looked at the direction in which she pointed--

"Hiyou, Junyou?"

Within the enemy fleet were the two light carriers responsible for the morning's ruckus, Junyou and Hiyou. With them were the heavy cruisers Kinugasa and Aoba, as well as the destroyers Akebono and Oboro.

That aside, the enemy was not advancing in wheel formation, but in line ahead--a straight battleline, suited for shelling. And, at the front of their formation, were Hiyou and Junyou.

"Carriers leading the charge?! Are you craz--"

"As promised, I have come to teach you!"

Hiyou's bellow drowned out Zuikaku's incredulous shout. She and Junyou surged forwards, sea foam blasting in their wake.

"The essentials of carrier warfare are repeated attacks! To charge into the heart of the enemy and bring the fight to them! This is how New 2ndCarDiv commander Kakuda won his victories in the South Pacific!"

The battle of the South Pacific had been a portion of the Battle of Guadalcanal--in the latter half of the decisive battle, the New 2ndCarDiv and Junyou, serving under Admiral Kakuda, had struck in place of the damaged New 1stCarDiv, closing in on the enemy carriers and devastating the paralyzed enemy with seven waves of attacks.

Admiral Kakuda had been an excellent commander who had the love and trust of his subordinates--Zuikaku could understand why Hiyou, flagship of the 2ndCarDiv, would worship him so.

"But if I remember correctly, at that time you--"

"Ahyahyaha~ Hiyou warn't there, not in the Battle of the South Pacific!"

Junyou chuckled, as if trying to complete Zuikaku's sentence.

Indeed, Hiyou had been forced to hand over the flagship position to Junyou, unable to take part in the battle due to a malfunction in her turbine.

"S-shut up! I was flagship of the 2ndCarDiv longer than you were, so I have more right to talk about this!"

"Maybe, you light carrier's speed, armor and capacity are all inferior to us....you're getting too carried away!"

"It's because we're light carriers that we have to get into the thick of things! Remodeled aircraft carriers aren't anything to scoff at, as I'm sure you know! A bit less armor doesn't make a difference!"

"But....!"

Well then, what will you do if you face an abyssal stronger than you?!"

".....!"

"Well then, let me avenge midwa--rather, let me show you my strength! Attack team, let's get in there!"

"Eh, guess Hiyou's got a point too! Let's go!"

After the initial clash between the Eagles and the Cranes' carrier teams, planes from both sides began to escape the fray. Below them, the other four surface vessels also began to open fire.

"What are we going to do, Shoukaku! We're getting into a brawl, and we're not quite ready for shelling battle yet!"

Shoukaku gaped for a few seconds before setting out new orders.

"All ships maintain formation and engage! Even if this becomes a slugfest, we have a chance to turn this around as long as Zuikaku and I are around! Is that alright?"

Keeping the carriers in the back and deploying the escorts as a shield--it was a cruel decision in a certain sense. Under concentrated fire, the escorts would likely take heavy damage. And yet, Tone and Chikuma both acknowledged the order with a nod.

"This is our 5thCarDiv's Shoukaku! I'll show you my shelling prowess! Right, Chikuma?"

"That's right! It's just like Samar again!"

"Focus on bringing down the enemy planes! All ships, clear the skies!"

The four shipgirls dodged, weaved and fired, evading enemy shells as they aimed their AA guns at the skies. Zuikaku, too, joined the fray as the enemy planes closed in...

Part 3

The Naval District's largest dining hall, the Toyokawa, faced the shoreline in one direction.

For the shipgirls of the naval district, this was their main cafeteria. A few chose the Naval District's sweets shop or bar instead, but the portions there were too small for developing shipgirls.

The dining hall today was a packed house as well. Shipgirls in free time sat at their favorite seats to eat, chat or simply watch what appeared to be anime on the TV.

"Owowow....that Hiyou..."

Zuikaku lowered her tray of food onto the table, wincing from the dozen aches and pains that wracked her whole body.

Today was Thursday and thus curry day, and the spicy aroma of the Naval District's special curry wafted through the cafeteria. Quite a few shipgirls were returning to the kitchen for seconds--mainly destroyers, but also a few standard carriers.

"Even if they're practice rounds, those blast shockwaves are nothing to laugh at. Geez."

"Are you alright, Zuikaku?"

Zuikaku grimaced in response to Shoukaku's concerned inquiry.

"Yeah, I can deal with just this. What about Shoukaku-nee?"

"I'm fine. I've been through that level of evasive exercise more than enough in real battle."

"Wow, as expected of Shoukaku-nee! Speaking of which, how about Hiyou's attack style? It was literally just straight up once, twice, thrice..."

They scene from the day's exercises hovered in front of Zuikaku.

In the end, the exercise with Hiyou, Junyou and the New 2ndCarDiv ended with a brawl and then a draw.

While the New 2ndCarDiv had gotten as up close and personal as promised, they failed to penetrate Shoukaku and company's blanket of AA fire. Both side's carrier complement had been exhausted, while the surface combat failed to produce a definite victor; both sides retired, nursing numerous wounds.

The affair, however, was not over. Saying "just a single contest isn't training," Hiyou had proposed the continuation of the Exercises.

After some negotiation, Shoukaku and the other shipgirls had acquiesced under the pretext of "training Zuikaku."

And so, Zuikaku found herself in her current state.

Veterans Hiyou and Junyou had quickly identified Zuikaku as the easier opponent and focused their attacks on her. Zuikaku in response had evaded furiously, ending the battle without a single direct hit, combat ability intact. Unfortunately, the shockwaves of countless near misses had taken their toll on Zuikaku, leaving Zuikaku covered in bruises and the battle inconclusive.

"For light carriers and their paper armor to opt for danger-close, all-in attacks...didn't they end up covered in wounds?"

"I can hear you, Zuikaku."

Zuikaku jumped in response to the voice behind her, turning to see Hiyou and Junyou walking up, each carrying their own trays.

Feeling a chill run down her back, Zuikaku remained silent. Hiyou, however, didn't appear to push the issue. She chose a seat near Zuikaku instead, wincing like Zuikaku as she sat down.

"Ouch...! Still, this is normal for light carriers. We must endure...."

"No need to push yourself so hard..."

"I don't like being hit either. But it can't be helped."

As if to suppress the pain, Hiyou took a deep breath before speaking in a prideful voice.

"Well then, what do you think of our fighting style?"

"how' as in...."

"Given, constraining the enemy carrier's movement is theoretically the nominal goal in carrier combat. But that's all it is, a 'what should be' when the reality's nowhere as simple; a hail mary line drive straight for the goal brings the greatest chance of success."

Hiyou's logic did make some sense to Zuikaku. Indeed, Hiyou and Junyou had fought her to a standstill through their close engagement attacks.

"I'd say it'd a little to early to make doctrinal conclusions."

Shoukaku responded, unconvinced.

"We are fighting an enemy both overwhelming and overpowering. Charging blindly at the Abyssals will bring victory only at great cost. In the long run we will be the ones driven into the corner by costly engagements."

"That is why we must be the Forlorn Hope--to secure those decisive victories."

"Your logic is becoming circular."

Hiyou glared at Shoukaku, who ate another spoonful of curry with an unconcerned expression.

"....whatever, it is not important. After all, we'll find out sooner or later who is correct on the battlefield....no need for haste."

Hiyou sighed. The corner of her mouth turned up as she turned to Zuikaku with a wink.

"By the way, Zuikaku, you really are quite something. To get away from such an overwhelming attack with only minor wounds....the goddess of fortune definitely stands beside you."

"M-me...?"

Surprised at becoming the topic of conversation, Zuikaku responded with a touch of confusion.

"I just did what I could...but speaking of which, you don't actually dislike me, Hiyou, right?"

"Of course I don't hate you. As your more seasoned senpai, however, I feel like I needed to tell you that. But to say I do not see you as a rival would be a lie."

"Ah, so that's how it is."

"Ahhhh~I wish they'd upgrade our carrier planes already. Stronger planes means harder strikes and more chances to make them count."

Zuikaku had learned from indoor classes that the 2nd generation Suisei, Tenzan, and Type 52 Zeroes were currently in development, with priority set on upgrading the 1st and 2ndCarDiv.

"In 'that war' Junyou and I never got a chance to use those new planes, all the way until the end...I guess it's just my dream."

Hiyou mumbled wistfully around the spoon in her mouth.

Zuikaku said nothing. Standard carriers like Zuikaku, Shoukaku and the still-absent Taihou had been fortunate enough to mount some of these second-generation machines.

"...I'm going to get seconds."

Hiyou picked up her empty tray and left, having seemingly cleared it out of nowhere. As she disappeared, the previously silent Junyou approached the two.

"Ara~sorry 'bout that, my sis keeps on bringing you problems."

Ever-cheerful Junyou scratched her head.

"I figured that Zuikaku'd be a little freaked out by this kind of first meeting, so I wanted to help clear some stuff up."

"You're saying that she has a reason....?"

"Everything Hiyou went through in 'That War,' her history and her feelings...I'm sure Zuikaku, who survived up until Cape Engano, would understand, right?"

Zuikaku blinked with instant understanding.

The aircraft carrier Hiyou had not been a fortunate carrier. Her unfortunate and premature exit from the Battle of the South Pacific set the tone for the rest of her career. Up until the battle of the Marianas, Hiyou had been unable to take part in the carrier war; when she finally joined the Battle of the Marianas, she lost most of her carrier complement in combat against enemy carriers before ultimately succumbing to air attack.

If Zuikaku had gone through a life like that--a chill traveled down Zuikaku's spine. Compared to herself, who had taken part in every carrier battle since Midway, Hiyou could well be her direct antithesis.

If she had been thrown into battle with such memories--

"Plus, Hiyou and I used to be civilian luxury liners."

Junyou raised a spoonful of curry.

"Denied a life as luxury liners and then denied the right to fight as a real carrier...Hiyou's feelings are...complicated."

(So that's why she said things like that...)

Hiyou's narrow doctrine probably reflected her obsession with truly performing her role as an aircraft carrier.

(That may be, but if she continues to fight like this, Shoukaku-nee's prediction will eventually come true.)

"That's why I'm hoping you guys can bear with her a little. Not gonna lie, I wanna have a real battle like the South Pacific again! That battle was great!"

Junyou puffed up her chest with pride. That victory in the South Pacific appeared to be Junyou's pride.

Suddenly Junyou stood up.

"Well, imma off to get another plateful too. Oy, Hiyou, let's race to see who can finish their second portion fastest! Drinks at Houshou's are on the loser~!"

With that, Junyou departed with a wave. In the distance Hiyou yelled "I don't want to! I'm not a child!" "Why's it matter," Junyou returned, "if you don't wanna bet on drinks at Houshou's, we can bet on dessert pudding~!"

"Hiyou and Junyou sure get along well."

Given their completely disparate personalities--hearing Zuikaku's remark, Shoukaku laughed gently.

"After all, they both are both carrier conversions of luxury liners..."

Shoukaku looked into the distance.

"Perhaps it's because of that they're bound together so tightly."

"So that's why Junyou's like that..."

Perhaps Junyou's carefree appearance was a way to cheer on Hiyou, Zuikaku thought.

Part 4

The next day, the mood in the Naval District Office was tense.

"I will now begin the Mission Report,"

the Admiral announced to the shipgirls in the office, a sheaf of documents in hand.

Six shipgirls had been assembled--Secretary Ship Shoukaku, Zuikaku, Light Carrier Hiyou, Heavy Cruisers Myoukou and Haguro, and destroyer Hibiki--evidently a carrier task force.

Today would be Zuikaku's last trial--the front lines.

"In other words, deploying with this formation in mind...was why he sent Hiyou to find me?"

In retrospect, the situation made somewhat more sense. Although the Admiral was a pervert, he also paid attention to the mental and physical wellbeing of the shipgirls--that could be seen from the daily affairs of the Naval District.

(....also, Hibiki was watching with Yukikaze during that battle with Kaga-senpai....)

Hibiki stood listening to the Admiral next to Myoukou, expression empty as ice. It seemed she was the cold type.

(Does she get along with Yukikaze?)

"First we will explain the current situation. Shoukaku, if you would."

"Yes."

Standing next to the Admiral, Shoukaku stood next to a whiteboard covered in reports, both combat and noncombat.

"Since we have begun our counteroffensive against the abyssals, our Naval District's objective has been to capture the resource-rich sectors of the western seas, and we have launched several offensives to that effect."

Shoukaku directed attention with a pointer to a map centered around the current location.

On the routes between the Continent and the Naval District were pinned three red thumbtacks, each representing the expedition fleets. Each was currently on escort duty.

The Southwest Island Waters's Okinoshima, Curry Sea and Jam Island bore blue tacks representing the abyssals, along with the Northern Sector's Moray Sea.

"We have already suppressed the 'gate' to the Western Seas, the Southwestern Island Waters, with some initial success."

"Initially...?"

Zuikaku voiced her surprise. Shoukaku responded with a stern expression.

"Yes. Recently we have been forced to suspend our offensive. Our problem lies here."

Shoukaku pointed to Okinoshima at the edge of the Southwest Islands Waters.

"We have found that the waters around Okinoshima serve as a large-scale enemy Anchorage. If we assault the Western Seas without dealing with them first, we may find ourselves attacked by their garrison fleets."

Zuikaku nodded. The safety of the supply line was integral to the success of an offensive. If a strong enemy awaited on the flanks, the fleet ran the risk of having their supply line cut.

"As such, the Naval District has temporarily suspended the offensive in the Western Seas and has launched several major offensives against the enemy harbor at Okinoshima. We will be committing our main force this time around in the largest offensive to date."

From the indoor classes, Zuikaku had learned that the abyssals would construct harbors within various sectors, acting as staging points from which further invasions could be launched. As the harbors expanded with time, it was advantageous to quickly remove them.

"In order to ensure the success of this operation, we have decided to keep our main force at home and stockpile resources. The initial plan had been to launch an all-out attack, but recent battles have sapped our strategic reserve, reducing our main force's range."

(So supply levels can constrain fleet movements, even in this world....)

In "That War", her side lacked both the power and the resources to continue the battle.

"Moreover, we have yet another problem--several days ago, a large force of enemy supply raiders have surfaced in the eastern Orel Sea."

Shoukaku pointed to a corner of the Southwest Island Waters.

"Our side already controls the eastern part of the Orel Sea, but the enemy fleets have been threatening our supply routes from the west. Given the possibility that they may also move up to reinforce Okinoshima, it is imperative for the Naval District that they be destroyed with all due haste."

"And you are the force assembled to deal with that problem."

Picking up from Shoukaku's explanation, the admiral stepped forwards.

"We cannot send the Naval District's main force. However, to leave the enemy fleet in Orel would bring problems. As such, your duty is to wipe them out."

"In other words..."

Hiyou sounded less than thrilled. The Admiral nodded apologetically.

"Apologies. We cannot dispatch the main force, so we had to send someone else--essentially, we are relegating you all to the role of second-line troops. Even so...are you willing to sortie?"

The Admiral gazed straight at Zuikaku and Hiyou.

(To think that the last test before enlistment would be a real battle....)

A prick of unease. Would she be able to do a carrier's job in this unknown battlefield--

(Even so, to decline now would be an insult to the Shoukaku class...! Shoukaku-nee's going anyways, so....!)

Zuikaku and Hiyou's eyes met, and they both nodded before Zuikaku spoke:

"Please allow us to deploy. Since the enemy consists simply of commerce raiders, even we should have good odds."

"Is that so."

The Admiral spoke, as if a burden had been released from his shoulders. Zuikaku quickly followed up.

"Does the enemy have carriers?"

"They do. They may be commerce raiders, but we believe that they are simply a picket force, and that a main force waits behind them. Once you dispatch the vanguard, you will likely encounter the enemy main force."

From indoor classes, Zuikaku knew that abyssal harbors were generally protected by a dense web of advance forces and pickets that constantly patrolled.

When approaching the main force, shipgirls either worked to avoid these forces via early detection or destroyed them altogether. As such, attack routes often remained fluid up until the moment of contact. Sometimes the fleet would be forced to retreat without meeting the main force at all.

"The small details of the operation will be explained by Shoukaku. Apart from when to retreat, I intend to leave all decision on the ground to your judgement."

Each shipgirl's eyes were now on the Admiral.

"I wish you all the best of luck."

Briefing over, Zuikaku left alone, plodding down the corridor. From behind her, came suddenly a voice.

"Zuikaku! Don't go yet!"

"Junyou...?"

She turned around to see Junyou catching up with quick steps.

"What's up? Hiyou went the other way...."

"I have something to ask of you."

Zuikaku blinked in surprise. Zuikaku nodded, speaking with a previously unseen solemnity.

"That briefing was about the next sortie, right? And Hiyou will be deploying with you..."

"Mm. But if you want the details, you could just as Hiyou..."

"Could I ask you to watch over hYOU?"

There was only sincerity in Junyou's eyes.

"Being serious is that girl's specialty--but when it becomes a carrier battle, she begins to tunnel vision on her own battle. Although I, too, think it's strange to ask a favor of a greenhorn like yourself, there are some things about carriers only another carrier could understand. As flagship, Shoukaku is busy as well. I won't force you or ask you to go beyond your means...but do what you can, alright?"

Zuikaku remembered what Junyou had said the day before.

("To be honest, I, too, do not approve of Hiyou's gung-ho tactics. I'm a rookie too, so I have to consider her pride...")

As Junyou's gaze lingered for several seconds, Zuikaku chuckled and nodded.

"I got it. Though I'm not too confident, I'll do what I can."

Junyou's expression instantly brightened.

"As expected of Zuikaku! So reliable! I hope to see the 'Lucky Carrier's' true power someday, yo!"

"That 'true power' came from coincidences!"

"There you go again~no need to be modest!"

Junyou cheerily slapped Zuikaku in the back. While she certainly felt uncomfortable, Zuikaku found that she didn't hate this feeling.

Part 5

In front of Zuikaku's gaze was the wide expanse of the Bashi Island Waters.

Zuikaku and the other members of the six-shipgirl fleet had entered abyssal's area of control, cruising through at high speed.

Until now, no enemies had been detected. However, it would be no surprise if the two heavy cruisers' reconnaissance seaplanes reported the enemy then and there.

It was a clear day, but the seas were a little more treacherous than they were around the Naval District--occasionally some of the shipgirls would be obscured altogether from view.

"SO quiet..."

The shipgirls were currently cruising in wheel/diamond formation to deter enemy ambushes. As they went, Zuikaku spoke quietly to Shoukaku.

"Are there really abyssal fleets here?"

"That's what previous records indicate. Plus, the scouts should be making their report soon."

Zuikaku nodded with unease. The gravity of real battle--and the life and death struggle that would ensue--weighed heavily on her mind.

(Even if the enemy consists merely of supply raiders, one mistake could lead to sinking...)

Sure, she had felt her life in danger during the battle with Kaga--but at that time Zuikaku had other things on her mind and had never quite felt terror. She felt it now, a constant undercurrent of fear.

The memory of her sinking at Engano remained fuzzy, she was unable to recollect the pain she must have felt then. And yet that uncertainty only served to strengthen the terror stirring in her heart.

(....! Damn it, I can't keep on going like this.)

Zuikaku shook her head.

(I'm a standard carrier. I've trained hard so that I could save this world, just like Shoukaku-nee and Kaga-senpai...)

"Zuikaku, are you alright?"

"Aaah!"

Shoukaku's sudden interjection caused Zuikaku to let out a shriek--mortified, she looked at Shoukaku and the others as they laughed.

"Fufu, you're a little too uptight, Zuikaku. It can't be helped--it's your first time, after all--but loosen up."

Shoukaku softened her smile, speaking gently.

"Don't worry. You've already accumulated more than enough experience in training. During that first battle with Kaga-senpai, didn't you escape sinking then too? Even if the enemy is a carrier task force, you'll be able to deal with it. I promise."

"Shoukaku-nee..."

Even in these circumstances, Shoukaku continued to cheer on her sister as always. In response to this kindness, Zuikaku could not stop her eyes from watering.

"Plus Zuikaku is my lovely sister, you know? I'll keep you safe. So don't worry and fight.

"mmm, yes....! I'll do my best!"

"Hold on, Shoukaku, are you just talking about your sister? Are the rest of us just cannon fodder here?"

Hiyou interrupted from behind.

"Nonsense. Since the Admiral has been kind enough to entrust me with the role of flagship, would I betray everyone's trust like that?"

With eyes full of confidence, Shoukaku met the question with a bold smile.

"Don't worry, I definitely won't let anyone sink. Not on my watch."

She spoke softly, gazing into the distance, as if it were a mere matter of fate. Next to her, Zuikaku felt both reassured and moved.

(Shoukaku-nee is reliable, as expected.)

Seeing Shoukaku standing with silver hair flowing, Zuikaku felt herself calm. And then--

"....! Shoukaku-san! Seaplanes reporting!"

Heavy Cruiser Haguro called out her report with a tense fear.

"Enemy fleet, straight ahead! One Torpedo Cruiser, Three Light Cruisers, Two Destroyers! It's most likely the enemy picket force!"

(A picket force--no carriers? We can hit them hard from the air then!)

Zuikaku's combativeness quickly surged. If the enemy had no carriers, she would have the initiative.

"Understood. Shoukaku to all ships, we're going to take out that fleet and open up the way towards the enemy's main force."

Shoukaku promptly handed out orders to the rest of hte unit.

"All carriers, launch the first wave. All other ships prepare for surface engagement! Move in as soon as the first wave has completed its attack run!"

"Understood!"

Zuikaku and Shokaku both let fly their arrows into the skies. Hiyou unfurled her scroll with a sweep of her left hand, revealing her

carrier deck. With her right, she drew out a bundle of paper carrier planes, forming them into Shikigami and launching them from her deck.

"Go--!"

As she waited for her carrier planes to form up above her, Zuikaku felt her terror subside. It was just like that battle with Kaga--once the battle started, there was no time for fear--

Having consolidated into their formations, the carrier planes flew towards the enemy fleet.

Several moments later, Haguro's shout indicated the beginning of the battle.

"I have visual of the enemy fleet on the horizon! Enemy is coming around to engage us!"

"All carriers, begin your first wave attacks! Surface fleet, commence shelling!"

"Understood!"

Looking to the enemy silhouettes on the distant horizon, Zuikaku focused on the targets.

When a carrier shipgirl knew the enemy's position, heading and formation, air attack accuracy increased dramatically. Shipgirls generally only launched a relatively inaccurate long-distance attack in the opening phase, in order to gain the initiative.

(What's the situation....?)

The carrier planes began to fade out of Zuikaku's vision. Not long after, the enemy fleet was wracked with explosions and pillars of water.

(Great...! This way the rest of the battle will be a walk!)

Zuikaku wanted to cheer. If this continued all campaign, victory was virtually assured.

"Enemy fleet is either badly damaged or sinking! They've stopped moving!"

Haguro spoke with relief. The abyssals on the horizon waited immobile, black smoke gushing from their wounds as if to confirm the report. Shoukaku immediately set down the next order.

"Initiate surface combat! All carriers, prepare your second wave! Let's finish the enemy in one go!"

"Understood!"

Part 6

It did not take long for Zuikaku and company to mop up the remnants of the first fleet encountered.

These abyssals appeared to have been a cruiser fleet--Myoukou, Haguro and Hibiki's gunfire quickly sank the survivors before Zuikaku and company needed to launch a second wave. No damage had been sustained in the encounter--a true total victory.

The six shipgirls pressed on through the rough seas. The enemy main force and its carriers were closing in, and so they put up a CAP of a few dozen fighters as protection.

And yet, Zuikaku's spirits had never been higher.

(My first battle...I survived...and won!"

She unconsciously balled her hands into fists. This victory proved that she could fight as a shipgirl against the abyssals.

(Plus, Shoukaku-nee's at my side....)

The post-battle report showed that Shoukaku had done the most damage to the Abyssals, her first wave having sunk two light carriers and crippled a destroyer. Hiyou and Zuikaku had been responsible for the remaining three ships.

As flagship, Shoukaku had both shown herself as an experienced commander and as a force to be reckoned with--Zuikaku had trouble restraining her praise.

(As long as SHoukaku-nee is here, our enemies count for nothing...!)

Though the enemy main force was a carrier task force, they had three carriers with them. That was no reason to let down their guard, of course, but as long as they fought hard, victory should be well within their grasp.

Zuikaku looked once more to the horizon.

All that could be seen was the wide expanse of the open sea. A few clouds dotted the sky, but otherwise all was clear.

"By the way--that was an impressive showing, Zuikaku, Shoukaku."

Hiyou spoke up from the back.

"Deciding the battle within the opening attack...the Shoukaku-class lives up to its name."

"Didn't Hiyou also work very hard?"

Shoukaku turned in response.

"The Hiyou class may be light carriers, but their carrier capacity is close to that of the Hiryuu class [\[38\]](#). Admiral Ozawa, our commanding officer in the Marianas, often said that 'the most important thing about planes are numbers [\[39\]](#); I believe you and Junyou are proof of that."

"No need for the praise. Once we run into stronger abyssals, after all, you standard carriers are far more likely to be in the thick of it than we light carriers."

Hiyou spoke with a hint of wistfulness. Perhaps witnessing Shoukaku's crushing attack power had made her aware of her own limits.

"Hiyou, I feel that you underestimate yourself far too often."

Zuikaku cut in from the side as Junyou's words flashed in her mind.

"If you look at the hard stats, that might be the case, but what about everything else, like fuel consumption? I heard that in 'That War', you and Junyou served diligently and efficiently as supply and plane transports due to your fuel efficiency."

"I understand that, and I am quite proud of it. However, this is not a world where you and I can avoid confronting the abyssals directly. When the time comes we must always do our best in the battle."

"That's why, this way of thinking..."

"This is my way of life. Nobody can change that....not even Junyou."

The curt resolve in Hiyou's voice was far too firm for Zuikaku and Shoukaku to challenge with further words.

"...but...thank you."

Several seconds later, Hiyou said with some difficulty.

"These words are far kinder than jabs about my low speed or thin armor. It gives me some comfort....and I am grateful."

Her words seemed to have warmed up all within the six-ship fleet.

Of course, it was at this time that a sharp noise pierced Zuikaku's ear.

Shortly after came a chorus of low howls.

(That sound...it can't be!)

"All ships, evasive action! That sound is--!"

Shoukaku shouted, her face drawn"

"That's the sound of a battleship's...!"

A second later, explosions and pillars of water surrounded the six shipgirls.

Part 7

In one of the Naval District's many auxiliary buildings was a kyudo/archery range [40]. While the range was not particularly large, its target area, shooting area and shooting field were all well furnished and maintained.

The main users of this archery range were the standard carriers.

Of course, the Standard Carriers simply need to shoot into the sky for their arrows to transmute into autonomous carrier planes, and in that respect anything more than a basic grasp of archery was unnecessary. Even so, guiding the carrier planes required mental focus, and kyudo was one of the best ways to develop that focus.

Today, Akagi and Kaga were up early to practice, dressed in normal uniform.

To focus their minds, both of them maintained total silence. There were virtually no misses. On the field, several fairies helped to scurry away with the loosed arrows and replace the targets.

At this moment, Kaga fired yet again--and missed completely.

"....."

Kaga silently nocked a second arrow, her expression a little incredulous--yet her result was the same once again, her second arrow going even further off the mark.

"Why..."

Next to her, Akagi lightly giggled.

"You must have some kind of unease in your heart."

"Unease?"

"Are you worried about Zuikaku?"

Kaga's eyes widened, as if she herself had not noticed. Unfazed, Akagi continued:

"That child who's caught your eye has gone to battle for the first time. Will she complete her mission? Even if you're fairly confident, the reality is often not that simple...that's what's written on your face."

"I don't see how that's possible."

"Regardless, it is the truth, no?"

In response to Akagi's inquiries, Kaga looked away, her face slightly red--it seemed Akagi was right.

"The 1stCarDiv has the 1stCarDiv's way of fighting, the 5thCarDiv has the 5thCarDiv's way of fighting...wasn't the one who taught them that you, Kaga? Those children will definitely come back safely."

Akagi gazed straight into Kaga's eyes. Sighing as if to admit defeat, Kaga raised her bow once more.

"Yes. However, it is also because of that..."

Kaga sighted the target.

"That we cannot fail. If we fail..."

Draw, loose--this time the arrow stabbed straight into the center of the target, the thud resounding through the range.

Akagi hastily suppressed the bitter smile that had almost reached her face. To be able to allay her own worries and strengthen her resolve with a single phrase--that was just like Kaga.

Akagi was one of the oldest shipgirls in the naval district. She had taken up her duties when the Naval District was first formed, and from then on had fought vigorously on the front lines as one of the main force. There was a time when Akagi sortied so often that the naval district's food and supply reserve had been whittled down to nothing--these days, those affairs were simply pleasant memories.

Because of this, many shipgirls worshiped her as "the reliable carrier onee-san," and because of that Akagi frequently cared for the other shipgirl's mental and physical health.

And for Akagi, Kaga, as her closest friend, was the one she cared for the most.

(Kaga may not honest, but she is truthful...)

As she wiped her sweat off with a towel, Akagi suppressed another sad smile. As she walked towards the hallway for some water, Kaga continued to draw and shoot without a second glance.

(But, as Kaga said...)

As she stepped into the hallway, a shipgirl approached Akagi.

"Yukikaze?"

"Thanks for your work, Akagi onee-san!"

Yukikaze's greeting was full of energy. From the way she had shown up, it appeared that she had been waiting for Akagi to leave the archery range. Akagi stopped, realizing why Yukikaze had been waiting for her.

"It's related to that, right? Could you tell me?"

"Yes. Although you could probably hear it from Hibiki nee-san once she gets back..."

Having voiced her hesitation, Yukikaze took a deep breath and whispered:

"As predicted by the commander, Zuikaku onee-san--"

Part 8

The chaos following the preemptive strike was limited in scope.

As the enemy had targeted the carriers, the other three shipgirls were unharmed. They immediately retaliated, turning to engage the enemy abyssals--the long-awaited main fleet. Hard on the heels of the battleship shelling, the enemy's first attack flight had followed clashing with Shoukaku's hastily-launched first wave before disengaging.

And yet, on the water's surface--

"Get a hold together! Hiyou!"

Panicked, Zuikaku turned to where Hiyou lay on the water, knocked over by repeated hits.

"Hiyou, the Abyssals are here! You can't just lay there!"

"Ugh, oh...."

Hiyou groaned in pain. The Hiyou-class' trademark onmyouji uniform had been charred black, and only about half of the flight deck scroll had survived the flames.

The wounds on her body, too, were quite severe; even movement was difficult.

The enemy battleship's shells and their carrier's planes had both targeted Hiyou in succession. Whether out of fortune or misfortune, the nearby Zuikaku had unscathed, while the lightly wounded Shoukaku fought on as if unaffected.

"Hiyou!"

Zuikaku shouted again. The frantic terror in her heart was tinged by a powerful regret.

(What was I thinking...?!)

There's no way we could lose against an enemy carrier task force with three carriers--that was what she had thought.

And yet in reality it was they who had been caught with their pants down, allowing Hiyou to be heavily damaged. Shoukaku's CAP, which had been forced to fight off the enemy's first wave unassisted, had also taken heavy losses.

Moreover, in this period of time Zuikaku herself had done nothing, gaping at Hiyou's wounds instead of acting to mitigate the enemy air attack as Shoukaku had.

"EUrgh...Zui...kaku...?"

"Hiyou!"

Hiyou forced her eyes open as she spoke with a tiny voice.

Having driven off the enemy planes, Shoukaku rushed to Hiyou's side. Evaluating Hiyou's wounds with a sweep of her eyes, Shoukaku gave her diagnosis calmly.

"...don't worry, this level of damage won't sink you. As long as we safely return to the Naval District, we can fix this much...."

"Shoukaku-nee, now isn't the time for this--"

"It'll be up to us to realize our objective from here no out, Zuikaku."

Though Shoukaku's smile was as gentle as always, there was a steely tone in her response.

Zuikaku blinked, as if dunked with cold water. While she was busy panicking, Shoukaku had chosen to face the current situation and act to mitigate the situation. Zuikaku felt as if she could die from shame.

Perhaps discerning what her sister was feeling, Shoukaku lightly stroked one of Zuikaku's twintails.

"Don't worry. It's not your fault that we are in this situation."

"Shoukaku-nee..."

Most likely, the enemy fleet hid underneath that cloud to evade our scouts, just like what happened quite a few times in 'That War.' Combined with the fact that the abyssals are somewhat smaller than warships, it's not your fault."

"But...!"

"You do lose a few points for not sending out your planes posthaste...but to be panicked by an attack out of nowhere is natural. Don't worry about it."

Zuikaku bit her lower lip. Although she understood that Shoukaku's words were correct, she could not honestly accept it.

Shoukaku regarded Myoukou and company, engaged in the surface action. Though the exact situation was unclear, the enemy had battleships and carriers--a disadvantageous situation without a doubt.

(What should we do...?)

From the recent battleship shelling and the carrier attack, the enemy's fleet probably consisted of one battleship, two carriers and three escorts. Not a losing hand, as long as they played their cards right.

And yet, the enemy's preemptive attack has crippled Hiyou, while the ensuing action had whittled down Shoukaku's complement. The only carrier at full strength was Zuikaku.

(But if I join the battle with Shoukaku-nee, we'd have to leave behind Hiyou...! And if we fail, we'll be wiped out...)

Shoukaku also remained silent. Perhaps she was also wracking her mind for a tactic to escape this situation.

"....Don't worry about me..."

"Hiyou...?"

Hiyou spoke with a hoarse voice.

"Don't talk too much, Hiyou," Zuikaku shouted, "and there's no way we're leaving you in this situation...!"

"I have to talk because this is the situation...if we divide our force to protect me, our chances are even worse...."

Though she was nearly bent over with pain, Hiyou continued to speak.

"In order to regain the initiative, you have to go all in and rush the enemy like Junyou and I did in the fleet exercises. If it's you guys with your speed, there's no way you'll fail..."

"What are you..."

Zuikaku took a deep breath. Moving danger close to engage as Hiyou proposed would increase the risk of damage. If it succeeded, however, it would likely turn the situation on its head.

But if Shoukaku and Zuikaku failed, the fleet would lose the entirety of their carrier force. Additionally, only one person still had the planes to execute this counter attack--herself.

(How can I pull all that off...?!)

"...I understand."

Shoukaku nodded honestly as she spoke for the soundless Zuikaku.

"Shoukaku-nee?"

"It is as Hiyou said--this gamble is our only chance. And if we don't counterattack soon, Myoukou, Haguro and Hibiki will be in danger."

"But it's way too dangerous! Shoukaku-nee, you told me in the past that this tactic was illogical..."

"If there were another option I would have taken it. We, whose only weapons are our carrier planes [41], should optimally spend the whole battle outside of the enemy's attack range--engagement from beyond the horizon.

"Well then...!"

"But if we are to reverse this situation, it's the only option."

"....!"

"Furthermore, Zuikaku."

Shoukaku smiled, gentle as always.

We do not fight simply to defeat the abyssals, but also to rescue our comrades. We all bear traumas from 'That War' that we must confront in battle--if we do not let these mental scars heal, they will fester and sap our will to fight.

Dumbstruck, Zuikaku was reminded of what Shoukaku had told her when she had first joined.

"Losing the means to fight is more than losing the means to rescue these innocents--it means losing the means to save ourselves. This war may well outlast 'That War;' if we allow our hearts to be

strangled under the constraints of tactical theory we may well end up in a nonredeemable situation."

Zuikaku recalled the people who had cheered her and her comrades on during their jogs, the destroyer shipgirls who had broken into smiles as a result, and what Junyou had told her.

(Hiyou is our valuable friend and ally...we have to value her heart, her hopes and her determination...in order to save the world, and in order to save ourselves...)

Zuikaku felt herself calm. The fear remained, but it was encased in a hardening resolve.

(If it's to reach our goal, I...!)

Zuikaku gulped, as if to force her previous feelings down her throat. The bitter taste of coal clung to her throat--and yet, somehow, that taste seemed to help her think more clearly than ever.

"Hiyou, Shoukaku, I'm in."

Restraining the tremors in her clenched fist, Zuikaku stood up.

"I'll take those two carriers down on my own...just you guys watch me!"



As Shoukaku had expected, the surface engagement between Myoukou, Haguro, Hibiki and the enemy ships was taking a turn for the worse.

The enemy fleet let fly yet again with another volley at the three shipgirls, enveloping them in seaspray and waterspouts.

"Uwaahhh--!"

Struck by a direct hit, Myoukou was sent flying, steadying herself only with great difficulty.

"Are you alright, Onee-san?!"

Soaked with water from near-misses, Haguro nevertheless looked to her elder sister with concern.

"I'm fine! Continue shelling!"

Myoukou responded promptly--she could not allow Haguro to worry.

Myoukou and Haguro were the 1st and 4th ships of the Myoukou-class, rather standard cruisers of the Naval District. While Myoukou was the nurturing older-sister type, Haguro was very much a youngest sister, weak-hearted and prone to tears. As such, Myoukou constantly worried over Haguro. Haguro was always willing to do her best, but low morale could still impact the course of the battle."

"B-but, at this rate!"

"I know! Hibiki, keep it up as well!"

"Acknowledged."

Engaging three enemy destroyers at Myoukou and Haguro's side, Hibiki responded consisely. Though she continued to cleverly

evade the attacks of the three enemy vessels, she had yet to inflict a decisive blow on any of them.

From the start of the battle, Myoukou, Haguro and Hibiki had repeatedly attacked the enemy fleet, only to be forced by enemy gunfire to change course. Though the enemy was only a single battleship, the two heavy cruisers were having trouble.

(Plus, behind that fucker...!"

Myoukou regarded the distant horizon, where two enemy carriers hovered.

?To complete the mission, both the battleship and the two carriers behind her would also need to be destroyed.

The carriers had done little for a while, busy organizing their carrier planes for the next attack. But sooner or later they would be done, and the attack flight would come.

(Our carrier strength has already been halved due to the shelling. At this rate, not only will we be able to respond, but...!)

And yet in spite of that, she still hoped for her allies to respond.

(If we can deal with the enemy carrier, we can clear the skies and have a chance to finish the carrier...)

"Myoukou! Please hold on a little more! Once the enemy carriers launch their second wave, we'll start our counterattack!"

Shoukaku's shout echoed. Doubting her own ears, Myoukou shouted back.

"Counterattack...? What are you going to do in this situation?
Shouldn't you focus on air defense to protect Hiyou?"

"Zuikaku will deal with the counterattack!"

With that, Myoukou understood.

At the same time, both enemy carriers launched their attack flight.



Zuikaku and Shoukaku dashed straight for the enemy carriers. Moving at their maximum combat speed of over 34 knots, they threw up a cloud of seaspray in their wake.

"Zuikaku, listen to me! We'll only get one chance--as soon as the enemy carriers launch their second attack!"

Cruising shoulder to shoulder with Zuikaku, Shoukaku elaborated.

"The enemy's second wave will most likely prioritize me as the greatest threat--but as a result, the fighter cover above them will be severely reduced, giving us a good chance of getting a hit in. That will be our only chance to take down those two carriers.
Understood?"

"Understood!"

Zuikaku eyed the two carriers on the horizon. A cloud of carrier planes surrounded them--they had completed their formation.

Behind her, Hiyou lay on her own, unprotected--they could not let a single enemy touch her.

"I'm dispatching my fighters to protect Hiyou, so we're not going to have any cover. We're going to need to dodge the enemy's air attacks. We can do it!"

"I know that!"

(Dodging the enemy air attacks on one hand and guiding the carrier planes towards the enemy carriers...)

Zuikaku went over her role in her head. This did not require saying, but it would not be an easy task.

(But if we don't do it, we'll lose this battle...in order to turn the tables, this is what we must do!)

"Enemy second wave inbound...Zuikaku!"

"Damn it---!"

Zuikaku's arm shot downwards. Instantly, her consolidated carrier planes buzzed towards the two enemy carriers.

As the two formations impacted, the enemy's bombers began to break through. Though a few fighters broke off to engage Zuikaku's attack flight, the intensity of their original charge and the ensuing clash meant that only a few managed to successfully come about in pursuit.

Roughly seventy enemy planes were now charging in Zuikaku's direction--roughly half of the second wave. Each plane had a passing resemblance to Zuikaku's own planes.

The enemy planes appeared to have figured defenseless Zuikaku would be easier to bully, and came from all directions.

(...Tch! But, compared to the battle with Kaga-senpai, this isn't much!"

"Naahhhh-!"

Eyeing the enemy carrier planes' movements, Zuikaku began to break into high-speed evasive maneuvers. As the enemy bombers closed in, she jinked left and right before backing away, reading the enemy's attack paths, moving erratically to prevent the enemy from finding a pattern in her evasive movements.

Carrier planes had to move in a straight path once they began their attack run--as such, it was possible to avoid their attack by a hairsbreadth by moving the moment they began their run.

To the enemy planes, Zuikaku's response appeared to have taken them by surprise.

Although every plane could close in on Zuikaku, she moved aside at the last second, leaving them to waste their torpedos and dive bombs in empty space. A few of the cleverer ones attempted to figure out Zuikaku's movements and lead with a bomb or torpedo--but thanks to Zuikaku's high-speed evasive action, they, too, could only return to their carriers empty-handed.

Zuikaku continued dodging as she assessed the situation. At the corner of her eye, she spotted Shoukaku dodging between pillars--her own situation, however, did not leave much time to worry about others.

(I have Hiyou, Shoukaku-nee and everyone's expectations on my back! How can I fail here...!)

Presently, the previously released attack teams were now above the enemy ships. Eyeing her target, Zuikaku shouted as loudly as possible.

"Carrier planes! Go!"

The bombers began their attack runs. As predicted, only a few fighters protected the carriers--the attack squadrons easily began launching their attacks.

(All that's left now is to hit!)

Zuikaku focused on the two enemy carriers, tracking the remaining enemy planes out of the corner of her eye.

A few seconds later, the two enemy carriers crumpled with explosions, collapsing into the water. Though it was not clear whether they had sunk, what was clear was that the enemy was not immobilized. Perhaps the goddess of fortune stood at her side after all.

"...! Got 'em!"

And yet just as Zuikaku raised a shout of jubilation, one last enemy plane, eyeing Zuikaku's movements, began its attack run, its path crossing with Zuikaku's.

Though she spotted the problem, ZUiakaku's momentum prevented her from turning in time, not completely--this was going to be a direct hit.

"....aw, shit...!"

Just as all hope was lost, the enemy carrier exploded in a ball of flame. Seconds later, a Zero fighter flew by.

"A Zero Fighter...? Could it be Shoukaku-nee?!"

The girl turned--Shoukaku, only a moment dodging a furiously, stopped on the water to wave at Zuikaku. She appeared to have recalled the fighters waiting above Hiyou.

"Nicely done...Zuikaku..."

Shoukaku smiled softly as she spoke to Zuikaku. She seemed to have taken medium damage, but the enemy planes had already broken off.



"As expected of the sister that is my pride..."

Zuikaku could not respond--although she had faced the same amount of planes as Shoukaku, she had escaped without harm. She didn't know whether this was due to luck or her efforts.

Shoukaku closed her eyes, reassured, before looking once more at the enemy fleet.

"Alright, let's start the counteroffensive! Deal with that battleship troubling Myoukou and company. Pull back the carrier planes and launch your second wave!"

"U-understood!"

Now that air supremacy had been obtained, they now had the initiative--putting the newfound confidence bought by her victory in her heart, Zuikaku began to recall the attack teams.

Part 9

The first thing Hiyou saw on waking up was Zuikaku watching her with a worried expression.

"This is..."

Hiyou strained her ears--all she heard were the lapping of waves. The sound of gunfire, the whistle of shells, the drone of the carrier planes, all of it had vanished. The sky was dyed red under the sunset. It would not be long before nighttime would fall on these waters.

"...Same waters as before. The battle's over, Shoukaku-nee and company are confirming the results."

Zuikaku looked at her as she responded. It seemed like she was currently resting her head on Zuikaku's legs.

Although she ached all over, she hadn't sank--

"What about..."

"We won, of course. Shoukaku-nee and I got the enemy's two carriers with a close range attack--afterwards it was just cleanup."

Zuikaku spoke with a reassuring voice.

"Hiyou, your tactic worked. On the other hand, Shoukaku-nee took medium damage, and I've lost enough planes such that continuing battle would no longer be a real option."

"Is that so..."

Hiyou mumbled in satisfaction. Although it wasn't the optimal result, she had been able to convey her feelings.

She suddenly broke into laughter--Shoukaku and Zuikaku were truly superior standard carriers. But for reasons she didn't herself know, she felt proud over this situation.

(Because they're my precious comrades...)

At the very least, Shoukaku and Zuikaku must have seen her that way to take on this high-risk tactic.

(Maybe I should trust my comrades a little more as well...)

As a light carrier, the only way to defeat stronger allies was close-range attack. This belief had not changed.

But apart from that, maybe she could try to play it out a little safer.

(Looks like I might have to listen to Junyou a little more.)

Hiyou smiled bitterly. Hiyou had always thought that Junyou's self-confidence came from never having been sunk--but perhaps Junyou acted that way so as not to worry her, burdened by the past as is.

(I ought to thank her when I get back...)

"Hiyou, you alright...?"

Zuikaku regarded Hiyou's face with worry.

Hiyou flushed with sudden embarrassment.

"N-nothing, of course! I am Izumo--rather, Hiyou! Once my wounds are healed, I will go out to battle as before!"

Zuikaku couldn't resist laughing in response to the girl's attempt at a dignified response.

"Ahaha! I thought you were going to say something, but there you go messing your name up again...Hiyou, you're really are quite the scatterbrain!"

"S-scatterbrain?! Isn't it a little rude to say that at this time?"

"No wonder Junyou worries,ahaha!"

"This has nothing to do with Junyou! Speaking of which, that way you said that...did Junyou tell you something?!"

"Eh? N-no, of course not~"

"Then why are you looking away and speaking with such a guilty tone? I won't let you get away with this next exercise, you know--!"

Hiyou wildly gesticulated in annoyance. Zuikaku, on the other hand (who had until now served as her pillow) continued laughing with joy.

Part 10

The setting sun colored the Admiral's office a crimson. The blue-themed classical desk, the carpet, the western-style fireplace and the ship model above it, the "Desu!" hanging wall scroll--there were no exceptions.

"In other words..."

Watching the similarly red-painted streets outside the window, the Admiral asked,

"My...no, our predictions were correct, no?"

"Yes."

Akagi responded, her face emotionless.

"The exercise against Kaga on the second day; the exercises with Junyou and Hiyou's New 2ndCarDiv; the report on the Orel Sea battle submitted by destroyer Hibiki--in all these situations, she was only hit once, and only in the first battle. Even so, this..."

"Given Kaga's strength, it's surprising she was only hit that much."

"Indeed. In comparison, the one known during 'That War' as 'The Unlucky Ship...' "

The Admiral raised a hand to stop Akagi. Without eye contact, he inquired:

"Then, it seems like that is this is the case. She--'Lucky Carrier' Zuikaku is has chosen to be like some of the other shipgirls."

The admiral's expression seemed dignified, and Akagi nodded with a similar expression.

"Perhaps she can use that luck to grasp the best possible future."

The Meaning of Luck (Part 1)

Part 1

The Naval District hosts several hot springs, but the most popular is the open-air hot spring "Bamboo Forest Soup" [\[42\]](#)."

Bamboo Forest Soup lies deep in the Naval District, surrounding the spring from which it derives its name; decorated according to the theme of "The Secret Hot Spring Gushing from the Bamboo Forest," it was well-loved by many shipgirls. It was quite expansive, readily taking in over half the naval district's shipgirls with room to spare.

"...whew~hot springs really are the best."

Zuikaku marinated in the pool, her legs on the rocks in a pose of relaxation as she let out her praise.

Due perhaps to the temperature that followed nightfall, the pool in which Zuikaku soaked was shrouded in a cloud of white steam. From who knows where came a sea breeze that clattered the bamboo that surrounded the hot springs against each other.

"To be able to warm up the body, remove your aches, treat your skin with spring water and (most importantly) just to relax...this is just the best...! Right, Shoukaku-nee?"

"Ohoh, Zuikaku is sounding more and more like a shipgirl by the day."

Shoukaku smiled happily.

This was the fourth day since Zuikaku's first sortie. After joint exercises with the other shipgirls, she had invited Shoukaku along to Bamboo Forest Soup. Recently she had found herself enamored to these baths, visiting the various hot springs in the Naval District or in the outlying towns whenever she had the free time to wash away the day's fatigue.

Shoukaku had yet to display an ounce of reservation to her sister's whims. Indeed, she seemed quite pleased with the fact that Zuikaku was enjoying daily life.

Shoukaku seemed the same right now, indulgently watching Zuikaku, submerged in hot water up to her neck.

During these four days, Zuikaku and Shoukaku had spent their days as before, training in the waters around the naval district.

The rest of the shipgirls were no different, with sorties limited to those on patrol duty.

The current attitude of relaxation belied the planned Assault on Okinoshima, a plan known by all the shipgirls of the Naval District.

The Operation would begin the day after tomorrow. Although Shoukaku and Zuikaku were not listed among the participants, they would likely either advance on Okinoshima as support for the Main Fleet or serve to suppress the Abyssals in other districts. As such, it was important that they train as best as they could for now.

Once Operations in the Okinoshima Waters had successfully concluded and if Zuikaku had no change of heart, the admiral would officially recognize Zuikaku as a shipgirl of the Naval District.

Shoukaku continued with a voice now devoid of post-training fatigue.

"Every Shipgirl has become addicted to hot springs after coming to this naval district. As said, the hot springs are extremely comfy...on the other hands, perhaps it's because we could not experience this kind of thing as warships that we need to enjoy it so much as shipgirls."

"Not to mention we were always on the seas as Warships [\[43\]](#), and all the showers used seawater."

Freshwater was incredibly valuable for a warship, and as such the average seaman could only shower with seawater. This was the case even for the new-model Shoukaku-class Standard Carriers and their improvements in comfort.

(Although I don't hate life on the seas, it's still nice to be able to enjoy a bath like normal people...)

As she stretched out her arms, Shoukaku spoke on:

"That's why I also enjoy hot springs. To be able to bathe with you, Zuikaku, is wonderful. Plus leisurely baths like these are great for removing all the aches and pains..."

"Ahahha. We've gotten hit together quite a bit recently."

As Zuikaku's expertise advanced, so too did the difficulty of their exercises. As the two were exposed to increasingly harsh conditions, the hits sustained had steadily increased.

Although they were both hit with virtually the same number of shells, Zuikaku reckoned that she had still been a little better off thanks to her luck.

While aware of the name of the "Lucky Carrier" given to her in "That War," this war and that were two different things. It would be dangerous to let down one's guard.

Shoukaku smiled wistfully.

"Yes. However, you've gotten used to the rules of this world faster than I had ever projected, and you've allowed me to relax. The great difference between 'That War' and the one here doesn't appear to have taken you by surprise."

"Hehe, it's 'cuz this Naval District's really comfy."

Zuikaku grinned contentedly.

"The Naval District has over a hundred shipgirls--it's like a busy family. Plus the food's good, the neighbors are friendly, and there are great hot springs everywhere...with all that in mind, the difference between worlds isn't even that important. Being a shipgirl's fucking great."

"It's important to watch your body, though. Zuikaku, since you've come, you've put on a few folds on your stomach."

"D-did I g-gain weight...?"

Suddenly feeling a burst of cold sweat, Zuikaku smiled crookedly. She paid great attention to these kind of things.

"Ugh, but every day the food is so good that you feel like you gotta have them all. Plus most of the dishes never existed during 'That War'..."

From the side came some rather cutting words.

"That is a sign that you are neglecting your training. You lack enough self-control as a shipgirl."

The speaker was Hiyou. She, like Zuikaku, was soaking her legs in the hot water, her hair tied in a neat bun as if proclaiming her good upbringing.

After Zuikaku's first deployment, Hiyou and Junyou often worked with Zuikaku and Shoukaku. They had gone together to the hot springs after concluding training.

The wounds Hiyou had sustained in battle had been completely healed, and her body now moved as if they had not even happened.

From the day after tomorrow, Hiyou and Junyou would be serving as reserve second-line troops like Zuikaku and company.

Hiyou closed her eyes as if savoring the warmth of the hot spring, all the while speaking with her usual seriousness.

"Though they do have their appeal, being too carried away is a problem as well. We are shipgirls, after all, forever under the eyes of the world..."

"There you go with all those rules and crap again...Hiyou, I always see you getting seconds."



"It's fine, after all I run a little thriftier than most carriers. Listen up, the Hiyou-class used to be luxury liners--"

"Ahyahya-!"

With an excited shout and the impact of a shell, a huge pillar of water burst in front of Hiyou's eyes. As would be expected, countless little droplets found their ways onto Hiyou as well.

"Sheeeeit, hot springs are the best! I feel all warmed up already! Don't'ya think so too, Hiyou?"

"Before that, don't you have something you need to say to me?"

Hiyou asked with a hint of irritation, her face dripping with water.

"Something I oughta say? Uhh~ya mean that time Hiyou weighed herself at another bathhouse and her face changed color~?"

"....! Junyou! You saw it?! Didn't you say you were going to another bathhouse?"

"You were lookin' around all sneaky like. That's why I had to follow you and take a peek. Only needed one to figure out what was goin' on!"

"I,I'm not worried about my weight! That's just a part of taking care of your body..."

"Hiyou and I used to be luxury liners, so we loooove western meals! Not only has Hiyou been to every western restaurant in the vicinity, but she's eaten every dish on the menu!"

"J-junyou!"

"While researching onmyodo at the shrines and monasteries, Hiyou's always munchin' on Japanese snacks too...ain't the one all caught up in worldly desires hYOU~?"

"Junyou, sisters like you...!"

An enraged Hiyou stood up from her bath, seemingly having forgotten to cover herself with her towel as she rounded on Junyou. Suddenly sensing danger, Junyou hurriedly distanced herself.

"If we're talking about worldly desires, isn't Junyou the same? As soon as you have time you're asking me to drink with you! Even if I'm worrying about my weight, you're part of the problem!"

"If you don't want to drink then don't drink~!"

"Well, it's because Houshou-nee's bar food is too good! If someone invites me it'd be rude to refuse!"

"That's nothin' to be ashamed about!"

"There are still some things you shouldn't talk about!"

"Well I mean you might grow a bit of a beer belly, but yo boobs will grow to normal size too, you know!"

"Hold on, what are you implying?!"

Hiyou ran after the fleeing Junyou, who nimbly dodged--there was little mood left in the surroundings at this point.

Shoukaku maintained an unconcerned air in regards to the ruckus around her. Zuikaku, meanwhile, looked to Shoukaku's chest and then her own before sighing with a bitter smile.

(Why is it that sisters have such a big difference...speaking of which, how are shipgirl chest sizes decided?)

To put it more subtly, the difference in measurements between she and Shoukaku was rather large. Given that their model and upbringing were virtually identical, why did this happen?

Zuikaku wanted to ask not only Shoukaku, but also the Naval District's most well-endowed Takao and Atago. That required a certain amount of bravery, however, that she had not yet found.

"Then again, though, Junyou has a point--though it's a little contradictory, one shouldn't be over-concerned about this kind of thing as well."

Shoukaku spoke as if to herself, all the while splashing hot water on her arms.

"We became shipgirls, after all, so it'd be a waste not to enjoy the perks..."

(Not just to save the world, but to save ourselves, huh..."

Because of their transformation into shipgirls, they had become capable of going through the daily life they could not even have imagined as warships.

From the overall mood in the naval district, there didn't appear to be any shipgirls dissatisfied with the current arrangements. More likely most of the shipgirls were of the opposite sentiment.

Maybe this was a salvation of its own. To enjoy the time between battles with the abyssals enjoying everyday life with comrades--this was something the shipgirls would not have dared to ask for in the past.

(...in that sense, Shoukaku-nee once told me that our objective is to 'save the Hearts of our comrades', but...)

Last time they had sortied, Shoukaku had indeed told her that.

(Do I have some festering wounds in my heart? And Shoukaku-nee, too...)

Zuikaku sneakily glanced at Shoukaku's expression--she seemed quite relaxed, contentment written across her face with expression unclouded.

(Perhaps the current Shoukaku-nee has already gone through this...)

The entrance opened with a clatter, and Zuikaku turned to the doorway.

"Akagi-senpai, Kaga-senpai...!"

Akagi and Kaga entered the bathhouse, clutching their own towels.

"Ah, you all are here as well. Thank you for your work."

After dousing herself in hot water, Akagi sat down near Zuikaku with a soft smile. Kaga did the same without a word, while Shoukaku nodded to them respectfully.

Zuikaku felt her heart race. Akagi aside, neither Zuikaku nor Kaga would have forgotten what had happened when she had first

joined. While Zuikaku held no grudge towards Kaga, she had no idea how to approach this Senpai. On another note, it was also because of her first sortie that she had finally understood the meaning of Kaga's words.

It seemed, however, that Akagi and Kaga had yet to focus on Zuikaku and Shoukaku, staring with grim expressions into teh water, as if hardening their resolve--

(It's worrying, as expected.)

Akagi and Kaga were also part of the Okinoshima strike team. Their thoughts were probably also focused there.

Zuikaku had heard a few rumors about the enemies in the Okinoshima waters.

According to the rumors, Akagi, Kaga and the rest of the main force had been worn out and forced to retreat by the picket fleets before even meeting the main force. Moreover, the number of patrols was unusually large--it would likely be quite difficult to reach the anchorage where the main force resided.

(Akagi-senpai and Kaga-senpai are going to have to head towards that place and destroy an enemy possibly even stronger than the ones before...)

What Akagi and Kaga were thinking about was all conjecture, but Zuikaku knew it would be unwise to bring up this topic. For Akagi and Kaga, the next battle was a battle for revenge--and one that could not be lost at that.

The grim aura lasted nearly a minute--surprisingly, however, the one who broke the silence was Kaga.

"Zuikaku."

"Y-yeargh!"

Zuikaku's words came out oddly due to shock. Maybe her senpai had heard her previous words and was about to give her a sound lecture--fear flashed across Zuikaku's mind.

"While Akagi and Kaga are out, the Naval District will be in your care."

"Y-yes! I'm really sorry...eh?"

Kaga seemed unconcerned with Zuikaku's muddled response, continuing slowly.

"We have yet to figure out when and where the abyssals appear. In the worst case scenario, the naval district itself may come under attack. If that time comes it will be your job to protect the naval district and the other shipgirls."

"But I..."

"This battle will involve not just us, but some 30-or so of our best-trained, front-line shipgirls. You, the Shoukaku-class, will be the only standard carriers left behind. 'Our skills are still rusty' will not work as an excuse if the Abyssals attack."

"....."

"Therefore, we leave the naval district to you. You two, who have returned from your first battle [\[44\]](#) should be able to exhibit the might of the 'future Main Fleet.'"

Kaga eyed Zuikaku--there was no disdain in her eyes now, only trust.

In that case, one would have to respond in kind--Zuikaku nodded with vigor.

"Yes. I will do my best!"

"Then we look forwards to it."

Kaga's gaze returned to the water.

Her words appeared to have softened the mood somewhat. With a wry smile, Akagi joined in.

"Akagi, really...sorry, Zuikaku. This is the only way Kaga knows how to praise other people."

"Praise...?"

"When you first joined the battle, she was very uneasy...hearing that you had returned bearing wounds she had abandoned training to look for you. But she watched from a distance, so you may not have noticed..."

"Is that so...?"

"Akagi. Your words are making me uncomfortable."

Kaga looked away, her face red--it was true, then.

Kaga gently nudged Kaga's shoulder as she spoke to Zuikaku with a laugh.

"That's why, Zuikaku, you should also work hard and reciprocate Kaga's expectations. I, too, have expectations for you as well."

"Y, yes! Thank you, senpai!"

Akagi nodded and looked towards Shoukaku.

"We'll be relying on Shoukaku as well. Perhaps it may be that you two will become the naval district's last hope."

"Yes, I understand."

Shoukaku inclined her head forcefully.

"I will pray for the safety of you Senpai. Additionally, regarding the enemy anchorage in Okinoshima..."

"Leave it to me. We will put the 1stCarDiv's pride and put an end to the enemy threat."

Akagi and Shoukaku quietly exchanged glances. The agreement between the new and old 1stCarDiv flagships lighted a fire in Zuikaku's heart.

At this time, Akagi suddenly darted towards Zuikaku and Shoukaku as she whispered to each of them.

"Also, if Hiyou and Junyou ask you guys to go to that Western Restaurant, make sure to tell me too!" "A-akagi senpai, you heard everything earlier?"

Akagi bared her arm with an amused expression as Zuikaku expressed her shock.

"I am one of the elders of this Naval District, after all. The words of my Kouhai can't escape my ears."

"No, what I meant..."

"Akagi loves eating, and as such she is quite adamant about eating out."

Kaga cut in from the side.

"That's why she always keeps her ears out for rumors about delicious restaurants. If you have questions about dieting, you can also ask Akagi--she knows quite a bit, you know."

"H-hold on, Kaga!"

"Hmhm...an eye for an eye."

A bare trace of a smile fought its way onto Kaga's face.

Zuikaku and Shoukaku also burst into laughter. It was a well-known fact that Akagi was the naval district's well-known gourmet, but her good friend Kaga joking about it added a new dimension to the joke.

(Not only Hiyou and Junyou, but Kaga-senpai and Akag-senpai also trust each other...)

Zuikaku looked to Shoukaku as she smiled elegantly.

"I need to quickly earn Shoukaku-nee's trust as well...)"

In another corner of the bathhouse, Hiyou and Junyou's verbal and physical riposte continued, but Zuikaku decided to act as if she had not noticed.

Part 2

Six shipgirls skated on the seas around Okinoshima, cutting through the waves as if they were trying to split the seas.

Today was the third day since the assault had commenced, and the shipgirls of the main fleet were now forming into attack formation.

This group of six crossing the seas was the first fleet--the fleet's best-trained elite.

The other main force shipgirls waited onboard the command vessel with the Admiral, awaiting the breakthrough.

"things have been going pretty well--"

Fast Battleship Kongou spoke up, relaxed and confident from her position as vanguard.

"We've broken through three fleets, and we're lucky to have escaped any damage...things are going way better than last time--!"

"After all, we were beaten to submission by their surface fleets long before reaching the main force."

Kirishima's voice spoke from behind Kongou, reawakening memories of the past.

"But I think this time's success comes from us learning our lesson and bringing up some real firepower."

"That's right. The 1stBatDiv [45]'s 姐妹[46] are so reliable--!"

Kongou glanced behind Kirishima. There stood the two shipgirls Kongou had called the 1stBatDiv 姐妹[47], armed to the teeth with multiple turrets--the 1st ship of the Nagato-class Battleships, Nagato, and the 2nd Ship Mutsu.

Armed with eight 36cm, the Kongou-class Battlecruisers could go as fast as 33 knots; juxtaposed to them, the Nagato-class Battleships mounted eight 41cm and had a maximum speed of 27 knots. At the time of their completion, the Nagato-class were world's strongest battleships, taking two places among the World's Big 7 Battleships. They were their nation's pride; in "That War," their specifications had led to them serving as the Main Force.

The Nagato-class' value had not changed, even among this Naval District's assorted shipgirls; they were the trump cards when things got tight, and the shipgirl's leaders.

In response to Kongou's words, Nagato responded with the stolid air of a career soldier.

"I understand. This engagement will be the long-awaited Fleet Decisive Battle. Leave brawling with their Battleships to me--I will make sure to meet your expectations."

"Being able deploy's not too bad. It'll be worth it, even if we get a little hurt."

Mutsu picked up where Nagato trailed off. She seemed the polar opposite of Nagato, friendly and approachable.

Unlike the Kongou, both Nagato and Mutsu had never been able to take part in the Brawl of the Battlewagons, greeting their end as

disappointments and misfits. This applied especially to Mutsu, whose end came through an ammunition explosion that sank her in port--a true misfortune. It was exactly because of this that their words bore such weight.

"Even so, we'll need air support in order to keep up our firepower. If the enemy takes the skies, we won't be able to spot with our seaplanes."

"We'll be counting on you today as well, Akagi, Kaga."

"Understood."

Taking the field once more as flagship and taking the rear, Akagi nodded to Kaga besides her before responding.

"This time around, we in the main fleet have pushed our skills to the limits in preparation for this battle. I shall bet the 1stCarD...no, the shipgirl's pride on this battle. We cannot fail."

"I'd prefer not to dwell on what happens if we fail--"

Kongou's grimaced.

As the Admiral had explained beforehand, the Okinoshima Anchorage would have to be neutralized before the Western Seas Sector could be attacked. The Western Seas Sector was an incredibly bountiful resource area--if this war had to be won, a transport route would have to be established to the region. The Abyssals, endlessly streaming from the bottom of the sea, would not be beaten with a short campaign.

Should the Okinoshima campaign fail, however, this whole plan would just be cart without a horse.

"Taking the Western Seas to secure supplies for a long war, securing the rear and driving the enemy from the Western Sea Sector, making contact with the other isolated nations and then uniting all of humanity's power for the decisive battle--these are our current objectives."

Kirishima's gaze sharpened as her words turned towards the future.

"But should we fail here and exhaust our strength and resources on the Western Seas' doorstep, our assault will grind to a halt. The initiative will fall upon the abyssals and their eventual counteroffensive, all of which will culminate in final defeat--"

"The enemy set up the anchorage in Okinoshima to strangle both the homeland and the western seas--from just that we can tell that they will most likely do everything they can to halt our offensive."

Akagi responded solemnly.

"Up till now, the enemy's hurriedly thrown themselves at our assault piecemeal without stopping to concentrate their force. If we let up the attack and give them time to consolidate, it'll be us facing the danger..."

"That development reminds me of some things I'd like to forget--"

Kongou shrugged.

Though her words were full of levity, their meaning were far deeper. Even if the early battles are successes, defeat at the decisive battle means conceding the initiative, followed by collapse--just like what had happened in "That War."

--No, there won't be any problem"

Nagato's calm dulcet tones acted as if to cut down the increasingly-grim conversation at its root.

"In order to avoid the same mistakes, we've entrusted the entirety of our memories to the Admiral. Given, we've turned into these shipgirls and so cannot verify the veracity of our memories--nevertheless, this all must have some greater meaning."

"Plus until now the shipgirl escort fleets have been pretty successful."

Mutsu joined in as if just recently enlightened.

The light cruiser and destroyer shipgirls in charge of fleet escort duty had been toiling not only to maintain the flow of materiel from the Mainland, but also to establish shipping routes to the Western Seas.

Even if humanity retook the resource areas, determining escort tactics and routes would require time--there would be no point if the resources could not be brought back to the homeland in a timely fashion. During "That War", their homeland had spent a large amount of time trying to figure out how to make use of their resource dumps--memories of those tactics came from those valuable lessons.

In order to meet the humans' expectations, the light cruisers and destroyers toiled everyday on these tasks. Of course, quite a few light cruisers and destroyers fought on the front lines, but the second line was as important as the first.

"Even in the last days of 'That War', when we the main force were immobilized through lack of fuel, they still fought to protect the convoys until the very end."

Nagato continued, full of emotion.

"This time around, I do not wish to make them bear so heavy a weight..."

"In order to avoid this fate, we must succeed."

Akagi took over once more. Having participated only in the turning point at Midway of "That War," Akagi may have been the one who felt the weight of Nagato's words the most.

"From here on out, the battles will get tougher and tougher. Perhaps we will need more shipgirls--the future of the Main Force is training at the Naval District daily. In order that they will have battles to fight..."

"I've heard."

Nagato had already figured out Akagi's implication.

"It'd be great if we could train her to be our trump card..."

Akagi looked to Kaga, who looked away awkwardly.

At that moment, Mutsu's expression tightened.

"Scout Seaplanes reporting, enemy detected! Closing in on our position!"

"What's their strength?" Akagi inquired immediately.

They were still some way from the main force and their anchorage--the enemy fleet ought to be like those they had met before--picket forces or mid-level patrols. The main force ought to be cruisers and

destroyers. With this current force, it probably wouldn't be hard to remove them--

Having finished communicating with the scout plane, Mutsu spoke to Akagi with an expression of shock.

"Enemy fleet composition--three carriers, one battleship, two destroyers. One of the ships seems like an elite Wo model--but it's glowing with a golden aura. I don't think we've ever seen anything like this before!"

"How can that be?! To run into hitherto-unknown abyssals--isn't this taking a mistake too far....?!"

Kirishima spoke, face drawn white.

It had already been confirmed that the Wo-classed aircraft carrier had a stronger form, referred by shipgirls as the Elite model. But if there existed a Wo even stronger than these two classes, it had not been recorded yet.

Moreover, from previous reports on abyssal fleets, mystery or new abyssal ships normally awaited at the anchorage.

And yet this time, patrol forces preceding the Main Fleet were already showing newtype vessels--just this alone was enough to unnerve the veteran shipgirls.

Adding to that, the enemy fleet consisted of three carriers, two battleships, and two destroyers--the same strength as a standard Main Force fleet. With this, there was no way to tell what was lying in wait at the anchorage.

"...reminds me of the first time we ran into the Wo-class back when we were holding the Line at the Nansei/Southwest Islands--!"

In spite of the sweat that beaded her forehead, Kongou grinned fearlessly.

The Nansei/Southwest Island Line Campaign had happened occurred some three months ago--it had been the first carrier battle between the shipgirls and the abyssals. Having cleaned up the seas around the Naval District, it had been the Shipgirl's first major barrier in preparation for the assault on the Southwest/Nansei Islands.

To meet an unknown enemy among the abyssals before reaching the main force--in spite of all the tension, Kongou glowed with excitement.

"Oy ye fuggin cunts, let's go glass some argies! Git those fookin' spitfires in the air--!"

"The flagship is me! Don't order us around--Kaga!"

"Understood. First wave, prepare to launch!"

Though Kaga's face was as serene as always, she roared with a vigor that showed she, too, was itching for a fight, letting fly with her carrier planes.

Akagi, too, was the same. The enemy had three carriers, one of which was an as-of-yet unknown Wo-class--the perfect enemy for a standard carrier.

To deploy a new Wo-class as a gate guard--what kind of enemy would the main fleet be? Unease flickered through their minds, but

only mmoentarily--there was an enemy to deal with, right here, right now.

"Stick to the plan--as soon as we launch our first wave, Kongou and company are to begin surface engagement! Focus on gaining air superiority and prioritize the carriers!"

"Right on--! You 'erd her ya fookin' wankers, follow me--!"

"Understood, Onee-sama!"

"Mutsu, let's go!"

"Understood! Let's pick out one of them carriers!"

As Akagi and Kaga's first wave assembled and launched, the four battleships, too, launched into their attack.

Part 3

"Ohhh....so this is it..."

An awestruck Zuikaku took in the sight around her as she spoke with a voice of praise.

The work area consisted of multiple brick buildings, ordered over an expansive clearing. From several of their roofs issued tendrils of black smoke reaching into the sky. On the ground, personnel [\[48\]](#) scurried to and fro.

The smell of metal assailed the nostrils, reinforced with a persistent undertone of smoke that came from who knows where. Though it faced the sea like the Naval District, not a whiff of the smell of the sea penetrated.

"That's right. This is the Naval District's factories--a second Naval District for us."

Walking alongside Zuikaku, Shoukaku turned to explain.

Generally speaking, shipgirls sealed their souls into their equipment--nobody observed or quantified this, nor did the shipgirls feel it, but there seemed no other reasonable explanation--and then released it in battle.

However, as they could not perform maintenance, repairs or development on their own, all these things were left up to the Naval District Factory. Zuikaku didn't know the details, but the shipgirls' carrier planes--including Zuikaku's arrows, Hiyou's shikigami and the like--were, like shells and torpedos, manufactured and resupplied here.

"Originally we were supposed to live on base in a nearby Navy Port's command headquarters. But you heard the commander--in order to allow shipgirls to live like humans, our daily lives were moved to the current naval district."

"Of course, staying here would be fairly boring. Shopping would be difficult from here..."

Most likely in order to preserve secrecy or to provide some measure of protection from Abyssal attack, the Naval District was ensconced deep in the harbor, quite far away from either the Naval District or the Train Station. Even Zuikaku and Shoukaku could only reach the factories on bus and foot.

Today, Shoukaku had brought Zuikaku to the naval district factories for a tour as a part of understanding this world.

They had seen off Akagi, Kaga and the other shipgirls to Okinoshima from the Naval base yesterday morning.

To be honest, Zuikaku had wondered, "is it alright to run off to this kind of place while the Senpai were fighting?" However, Shoukaku had brought Zuikaku over with the explanation that "now, more than ever, we should look over these places."

"From here on out, the battles with the abyssals will become increasingly vicious. If we are to resist them, we will not only have to hone our skills, but also maintain and update our equipment. I believe that it is precisely because our senpai are on the front lines that we ought to learn with their efforts in mind."

Yesterday, Shoukaku had used this argument to convince the previously reluctant Zuikaku to tour the naval district factories. Having seen them with her own eyes, Zuikaku also felt she had gained a better grasp of them.

(This is the place that has been supporting us in our battles, huh...)

Thinking back, victory in "That War" had depended heavily on having the right equipment in the right amounts, in the right place. Seeing that war under the same lens, things seemed somewhat safer.

"I recall that this would be the meeting place..."

Having reached the factory meeting room, Shoukaku fretted softly.

"Meeting? Is someone coming?"

Yes. To be honest, I've only been at the factory once as well, so I'm not very clear on things either--that's why I asked a shipgirl familiar with this place to be our guide."

"A shipgirl familiar with this place?"

"S, Sorry I'm late--!"

From the distance came a voice--Zuikaku turned to see a shipgirl wearing equipment that seemed far too heavy for her slender frame. Dripping with sweat, she leaned with her hands on her knees, gasping for breath.

"Yuubari! You're the guide...? Speaking of which, are you alright?"

Zuikaku spoke with shock.

Yuubari was one of the light cruiser shipgirls. Having been designed with the absurd goal of "fitting the armaments of the 5000-ton Kuma-class Light Cruisers onto a 3000-ton ship," she had no sisters.

Borne of designing ingenuity, the ship design met the fulfilled requirements and caught the eye of the Naval Community. However, the warship also struggled with range and reliability issues, as well as the inability to mount seaplanes, among other flaws.

"Whew, whoo...this level isn't a problem..."



The young girl forced out a sweaty grin with a thumbs-up. No matter how you looked at it, this was very much a problem.

"A, anyway, let's find somewhere to rest. Do you want something to drink?"

"Don't worry about it! Visiting hours are limited, so let's hurry up.....woaaahhhh--!"

Yuubari broke into a run--and then promptly collapsed. The giant equipment set on her back slammed into the ground with a rumble that summoned a cloud of dust. Her trademark sailor's uniform and green skirt were also soiled with dust.

Zuikaku stood and gaped. Shoukaku, meanwhile, spoke tactfully.

"...Anyhow, let's take it easy, you can introduce us on the way."

"S,sorry about that~"

Yuubari responded tearfully from where she lay, pinned down by her equipment.

"Moving on, this factory develops equipment, and Yuubari records the data?"

Zuikaku spoke up as they walked through the factory grounds.

With a finger on her face, Yuubari responded with a hint of embarrassment.

"Not all of them, but I inspect all the equipment I can use."

Of course, light cruisers cannot mount 41cm or a carrier's plane complement.

"Think about it--I'm an experimental warship, armed with this heavy outfit. Giving an objective evaluation and giving a second opinion on how it feels in a shipgirl's hands...I specialize in this kind of thing."

Yuubari patted her equipment proudly.

On closer inspection, what looked like two joysticks lay on either side of the outfit. Shipgirls with this type of outfit were limited to Yuubari on this Naval District. Perhaps it gave her extra stability when using her heavy equipment--it certainly gave Yuubari a familiarity with manipulating equipment that other shipgirls lacked.

"It's also because of this that fuel consumption is so high....even if average speed isn't very high, it's not like that once the battle starts."

"But for you to work here in this kind of place...as expected of a prototype ship. Someone like me wouldn't be able to pull it off."

"Ahaha, hearing you say things like that makes it worth it for us experimental ships. My specialty is equipment control--I won't lose to any other light cruiser, even in a real battle!"

Yuubari raised her right fist. It seemed that her role as "the experimental ship in the factory" had become her pride.

(For Yuubari, is this a kind of redemption....?)

The thought flashed across her mind as she watched Yuubari speak happily.

(But remember that Yuubari should be like Shoukaku and I, sank by the enemy...does she dwell on that kind of thing like Hiyou...?)

"Yuubari, you were pretty active in 'That War', right? You were a torpedo squadron flagship, escort fleet member, a participant in the 1st Battle of the Solomon Seas..."

As if to answer Zuikaku's question, Shoukaku brought up Yuubari's past.

"The Admiral's also full of praises for you as well--says your activity was nothing like that of an Experimental Ship. Plus your performance against the abyssals was even more exemplary..."

"Ahaha....well, about that, I guess I was just lucky."

"Even when you sank, didn't over 95% of your crew survive? Samidare, who rescued your crew, made a report of that sort during 'That War.'"

"Ah, yeah, that's true."

Yuubari nodded awkwardly. At the side, Zuikaku also felt a bit of tension.

Questions on the line of "What happened to the people aboard me" were banned in all but name in the Naval District. After all, nearly every shipgirl who had come to the naval district had sunk in "That War", usually with a significant part of the crew. For the shipgirls who retained memories of their deaths, this topic hit far too close to home.

Even shipgirls such as Junyou who had survived the war did not discuss these things. Bringing it up equated to drawing a

comparison between "I, who allowed my crew to successfully survive" with "The rest of the shipgirls , who could not preserve their crew."

Zuikaku had also avoided this topic in order to protect these kinds of memories.

So why did Shoukaku--

(If I recall correctly, Shoukaku-nee lost 75% of her crew when she sank in the Marianas. At the time I ended up with a crew of about two thousand. In other words....)

This memory was too cruel--and yet, Shoukaku had voluntarily broken that taboo in order to praise Yuubari.

As if prescient of Yuubari's thoughts, Shoukaku laughed and responded,

"Don't worry, I remember what happened perfectly. But even so, it's not good to keep one's feelings buried up."

"Shoukaku-nee...."

"It's like what I told Zuikaku earlier--I know not whether we were in the right or in the wrong during 'That War'. Therefore, it is pointless for us to ruminate on whether those who we failed to save died for a good cause...however, burying these bitter memories at the bottom of our hearts only serves to raise the possibility that they will one day crawl out and kill us. Though our bodies are strong enough to fight the abyssals, our hearts are still very, very human..."

"....."

"Therefore, I want to accept everything that has happened and moved on....please keep these words between the two of you, of course."

"....I understand. After all, there are shipgirls who went down with all hands..."

"Sorry, the topic has become rather mrobid."

Shoukaku smiled sadly as if to try to diffuse the situation.

"That said, you should be proud of your high survival rate. We're all standing behind you, so give it your best."

"Sounds good! Hearing an old guard like Shoukaku-nee saying that really cheers me up!"

Yuubari replied with a smile like before.

Zuikaku began laughing as well, infected by Yuubari's smile. At the same time, she felt that her faith now lay on even firmer foundations.

(Shoukaku-nee is amazing, as expected...! To be able to subjugate her memories and fight the abyssals...)

Zuikaku did not know how many others shared Shoukaku's mentality. Maybe most of the shipgirls in the old guard were the same--even if that were so, however, Shoukaku's luster in Zuikaku's eyes did not wane.



The Naval District Factory's Development Zone was under heavy security--no ordinary individual would be able to go in or out.

"Well, nobody is quite sure how much the Abyssals know about us and how much they may want to know. In order to protect our important secrets, this kind of thing is a necessity."

Yuubari raised her finger.

Just now Zuikaku and Shoukaku had passed through the cannon and torpedo development and manufacturing areas under Yuubari's guidance, all without even a glimpse of the interior. It seemed like the security measures applied to the shipgirls as well.

(Well, it's true that some of the shipgirls aren't too reliable in terms of keeping secrets).

With the childlike destroyers in mind, Zuikaku nodded, feelings conflicted.

"I'm not familiar with every Zone in the factory, and there are still some advanced armaments that must remain secret for now. There are a few unnamed areas in the factory that even I know nothing about."

"Experimentation and vivisection on captured Abyssals, maybe?"

Zuikaku's joking inquiry was met with a wry smile Yuubari.

"I, too, have wondered stuff like 'whether these crazy things are happening in there~'. Sorry to say, though, it's all just rumors."

"Ehh, how boring."

"Even though we don't know whether the abyssals know about this factory's location or significance, the crap would flow up shit creek real fast if we shut them up in there like in some late-night anime and they escaped to their comrades."

"Ah, that's true...hold on a second, late-night anime?"

".....! Ahaha, I have no clue what you're talking about."

Yuubari looked the other way, whistling loudly. It appeared she, too, had "another" side to her.

"But if security measures are so tight, isn't this tour completely pointless?"

"Oh don't be worried about that, look!"

Yuubari pointed at the sky.

"THat's....!"

Zuikaku's eyes widened.

Several Zero fighters were flying in formation. These fuselages were different from those of Zuikaku's Type 21 Zeroes, instead bearing a dark green.

(The new Type 52 Zeroes...? But it seems like there are some different ones in there...)

There were two types of Zeroes in there--one was the Type 52--the other type bore the same general outline as the Type 52, but bore what seemed like bombs on its belly.

"That's..."

"Type 62 Zero. A bomber version of the Type 52 Zero--what we call fighter-bombers!"

Another voice emanated from the mini flight deck that lay below the Zero Formation--Zuikaku spotted a shipgirl, dressed like an onmyodo in the fashion of Hiyou and Junyou.

This person was the light carrier Ryuujou, her distinctive visor glinting in the sun. She was most likely piloting the carrier planes via the "decree" Kanji written in blue light on her right fingertip.

Though Ryuujou had been designed as a carrier from the outset, her appearance had been incredibly unique, most likely due to the constant revisions made during her construction. The Ryuujou right here, however, was a normal shipgirl with a normal girl's body, no different from the others.

"Ryuujou," Zuikaku remarked, "you work here like Yuubari?"

To be sure, Ryuujou was a light carrier, suited (like Yuubari) to actions in the second line. But though a light carrier, Ryuujou had served as a front-line combat carrier in "That War". Seeing her like this seemed kind of odd.

"Naw, ah don't come 'round these parts nearly as much as Yuubari here. Ah jes visit once in a blue moon to check on the new aeroplanes."

Ryuujou responded proudly in her Kansai dialect, steering the carrier planes with her left hand with right arm akimbo.

How and why Yokosuka-born Ryuujou spoke with a Kansai dialect was one of the Naval District's seven great mysteries.

"Y'all know about how Houshou-nee's in charge'a'this kinda thing, right? Well, Houshou-nee's also a captain in the Naval District, so ah take turns runnin' the coop here at the factory with Shouhou an' Zuihou."

Now Zuikaku understood. If she was rotating with the other light carriers, the effect on overall frontline efficiency would be minimized.

"Plus, ah never got a chance to use the new aeroplanes durin' 'That War' on account of my flight deck bein' too short--no problems now, though! Bein' able ta use these new aeroplanes ahead of all y'all standard carriers--well, ah'd say ah right earned it....go!"

A she shouted, Ryuujou unfurled the flight deck scroll clasped in her right hand, revealing the new Shikigami mounted on top. Instantly, the Shikigami transmuted into the Type 62 Fighter-Bombers, lifting off from the flight deck one after the other.

"Hmhm, ah reckon ah'd have used these kinda fighter-bomber aeroplanes if ah'd made it to the Marianas...it kinda makes me all giddy inside~"

Ryuujou rubbed her nose happily. As she had said, Ryuujou had sank before the battle of the Marianas Sea, having fallen during the Guadalcanal campaign in the 2nd Battle of the Solomon Seas. She had never had the chance to mount or use anything more advanced than the three early-war planes.

"I can't use carrier planes, so when it comes to inspecting planes I call over Ryuujou or the others."

Yuubari picked up from where Ryuujou left off.

"Recently, development of the Type 52s are nearly complete--the 1stCarDiv and the 2ndCarDiv will be able to equip them soon; we'll also manufacture a few of the Type 62s on a trial basis. It probably won't be long before you two in the 5thCarDiv get upgrades as well, so look forwards to it. The other new model planes are currently in development!"

"Ah, that's great! Thanks, Yuubari!"

Zuikaku allowed her sincere joy to show. Carrier planes are the crux of a carrier--especially the Zero Fighters, vital for claiming air superiority. It would be great if new model planes were prepared quickly.

At the same time, a question popped into Zuikaku's mind.

For the fleet, carrier planes were not the only important piece of equipment. This lesson had been hammered in through experience during "That War"--

"Speaking of which, I have a question..."

Zuikaku leaned towards Yuubari and whispered:

"How is the Radar development? I remember we started equipping several during the middle of 'that war.'"

Essentially, radars launch a radio wave towards the target, using its reflection and diffraction to determine the target's distance and heading.

In "That War", Zuikaku's carrier task force had not been able to use the radar to their full potential. Originally, development had not been complete in time for midway; afterwards, the enemy military's technological superiority led to increasingly dire situations.

Yuubari nodded seriously.

"We're working on development. Look, this is a Type 21 AA radar sample."

Yuubari turned her body to reveal a machine that vaguely resembled a hair ornament.

"The Type 21 should be ready for battle soon; other AA and surface radars are being researched. For torpedo squadrons such as mine, radars in night battle are a decisive factor."

In low-visibility night battles, being able to determine the enemy's position at a distance via radar could well spell the difference between victory and defeat.

Just to be safe, Zuikaku pressed on:

"Do the Abyssals have anything on the lines of Electronic Support Measures?"

Electronic Support Measures (ESM) allowed the user to detect radar waves and use it to determine their source's position and heading.

During "That War," Zuikaku and company's limited experience with radar usage came from high command's fear that the enemy would be able to detect their position with ESM. In reality, radar technology advanced incredibly quickly, the potential dangers of ESM (which needed to send out radio waves of their own) were easily outstripped by the advantages of everyday use of radar.

Even so, that didn't rule out the possibility that the abyssals this time around did not have this ability.

Yuubari vigorously shook her head.

"Thus far it doesn't seem that way--at least that's what I've been told from the factory's Abyssal Research Class. As such, compared to something of limited utility such as ESM, I figure we may as well just go straight ahead with radar development."

"Plus when Carrier Task Forces fight it out, the radar's ruther important compared t'ESM."

Ryuujou joined in, her expression none too pleased.

How to meet the enemy attack determined a carrier's life and death. The ability to determine enemy plane distance with air radar was vital for the Carrier Task Force.

"Who knows, the Abyssals might develop something like radar, rendering our airstrikes ineffective just like the enemy in 'That War'. Before that happens...right?"

Currently, humanity's ability to detect the abyssals was not based on sound or visual identification, but via shipgirl radar detection. For reasons unknown, the Abyssals were undetectable by any other means.

From this alone, it was clear that the presence of radars would affect the tide of this war.

"I will do all I can over here. Zuikaku-nee, if you make some new discovery in battle, make sure you notify me."

Yuubari looked to Zuikaku with sincere eyes. Ryuujou's expression was also stern.

"In order to avoid repeatin' the tragedy of 'That War', let's give it all we got."

It was well past noon by the time Zuikaku and Shoukaku left the Naval District Factory.

They had been invited with Ryuujou by Yuubari to lunch at a Soba shop well-liked by the Factory--it appeared the Yuubari really liked Soba Udon.

"Thanks a lot today, Shoukaku-nee!"

Zuikaku spoke en route to the nearby bus station.

"That was pretty much a class. It wasn't until now that I realized we wouldn't be enough to fight the Abyssals. I'd been taught that not only in 'That War', but also by Kaga-senpai...I guess I'm still not ready yet..."

"Man is not born wise, and the same applies to shipgirls. Don't take it to heart."

Shoukaku smiled gently as always as she spoke.

"There is only one thing--one thing that you must learn, and that is to never stop going forwards. One day all this will be of help to you. As long as you remember your current feelings, it'll be fine if you continue to do your best."

"Mm! It's great that I'm sisters with Shoukaku-nee. It's because Shoukaku-nee is here that I could come this far...thank you very much!"

"Flattery won't get me anywhere, you know."

"That has nothing to do with it!"

Zuikaku grinned innocently, and Shoukaku smiled softly in return

And yet moments later, the small smile faded from Shoukaku's face--replaced with a new stiffness.

Noticing this, Zuikaku inquired cautiously,

"Shoukaku-nee...?"

"...The Admiral has sent out a transmission requiring that we immediately head to the naval port."

"Could it be a new abyssal? From where....?"

The words exchanged with Akagi and Kaga in the bathhouse a few days ago surfaced in Zuikaku's mind.

"No, you're mistaken."

Shoukaku's expression showed hitherto-unknown grimness as she responded. [\[49\]](#)

"We're going to Okinoshima."

Part 4

It was silent on deck onboard Zuikaku and company's destination, a ship used by shipgirls in between patrols around Okinoshima as a rest stop.

There would normally be several shipgirls waiting to be deployed on deck, but currently not a single one could be seen. The interior of the ship was the same--not a single one of the main fleet shipgirls that had deployed days ago from the naval port could be found.

Equipment in various states of damage and bloodstained littered the floorboards. Among them were what looked like 41cm turrets, their tough turret faces cracked. Even the fairies looked bitter as they scurried about with their labors.

"What...happened...?"

Zuikaku regarded the scene before her, face pale. She had just arrived via a speedboat.

"Where are Akagi-senpai and Kaga-senpai? Plus the other shipgirls..."

Zuikaku and Shoukaku's four fellow passengers--Aviation Battleships Hyuuga and Ise, as well as Heavy Cruisers Maya and Choukai-- were equally shocked. These four had also been Main Fleet members, but had until now remained at the Naval District as part of the home guard.

"....relax. If the equipment remains are here, it means that everybody returned."

Shoukaku strode through the ship aisle, her expression suggesting she, too, had seen enough.

"Let's go, the Admiral should be waiting for us in the office.

"I hereby order you all to attack the enemy anchorage located in the Okinoshima waters."

The Admiral's first words hit them the moment they entered the office.

"The situation is as you have likely surmised. You all sortie in an hour--prioritize anti-ship equipment, but keep in mind the possibility of night battle pursuit. Any questions?"

There was a (never-before-heard) grimness in the Admiral's voice that made him seem like a different individual altogether.

"Please wait a moment...!"

Zuikaku could not stop herself from speaking.

"Please explain, what do you mean by sortie...and what did you mean when you said 'the situation is as we have likely surmised'? I don't understand at all!"

"Do you really not understand?"

"I don't understand!"

Zuikaku stared at the Admiral. "Do you really not understand"--that had obviously been a blunt refusal. She felt her heart sink, but she could not voice her feelings--if the Admiral did not explain, she wouldn't be able to accept it--

The other shipgirls maintained their silence in response to Zuikaku's inquiry.

Only one person--just Shoukaku--eyed the Admiral in a silent plea.

"...Pardon, I am in the wrong. It seems that the urgent nature of this situation has prevented you from calming down...I will explain, then."

The Admiral apologized honestly, and then stood up with a breath.

"The abyssal ships launched an attack from their Anchorage in the Okinoshima waters and devastated our main fleet. Currently, the wounded shipgirls have retreated to the rear for rest and reorganization."

Though she had largely figured this was the case, Zuikaku still felt as if she had been struck with a mental two-by-four.

(How did this happen, that Akagi-senpai and Kaga-senpai...)

Akagi and Kaga should have been two of the most powerful ships in the Naval District, and they had been escorted by Nagato, Mutsu, Kongou, Kirishima and the other Main Fleet ships. The fact that the attack on the Okinoshima Garrison Fleet had failed even after these elites were committed was incredibly unsettling.

(But why send us to meet this kind of enemy?)

"Nevertheless, this operation cannot be aborted now. Our resource stockpile will only allow us to sortie one more time--this time. As such, I have decided to commit you all from the reserve fleet and roll the dice one last time."

The Admiral was going all-in.

"There will be many patrols in the Okinoshima waters, among them being a new, previously-unseen Wo-class--I hope that you will be able to break through these forces and take on their Main Fleet. The report on the enemy disposition is as above; are there any questions--"

"Please hold on!"

Zuikaku raised her voice one more in inquiry.

"Is that all the intel on the enemy we have? What about the Main Fleet's report? The Senpai and the main fleet..."

"To be quite honest, we have met the enemy main fleet nearly every time we deployed,"

the Admiral explained irritably.

"However, we have had to retreat every time with all our ships on the verge of sinking. Every fleet member appears to have lost their memories by the time they reached this ship [50]--as a result, we have received no intel regarding the enemy Main Fleet."

"....!"

"All we know is that 'the enemy main fleet has multiple powerful battleships'--power to be able pierce Nagato and Mutsu's armor, at any rate."

"But even if we fought an enemy of that caliber...."

"And that is why I am using this fleet. Even if we sent our own Battleships in a direct confrontation, we would still be beaten to a pulp by the enemy's firepower. As such, I want to bet the battle with the enemy Main Fleet on Maya and Choukai's torpedos, with you four serving as support."

Though Heavy Cruiser shipgirls lacked the firepower and armor of battleships, they possessed the speed rivaling destroyers and torpedoes, which battleships lacked. As long as they could get close, it was more than possible to take down a battleship.

In that respect, this fleet composition might work. And yet--

(But, this is even more....!)

"Shoukaku will serve as flagship. You are to carve a bloody trail to the enemy fleet, no matter what happens--should you fail, we will have to retreat."

The Admiral and Shoukaku exchanged gazes.

(Shoukaku-nee...)

Hiding her unease, Zuikaku tried to read Shoukaku's expression. Since Shoukaku was the flagship on the ground, she had the option of countermanding the Admiral's orders.

Nearly a minute of silence later, Shoukaku nodded quietly.

"Understood."

Shoukaku spoke one more phrase as Zuikaku gaped.

"We will definitely bring about a beautiful result."

Part 5

Led by Shoukaku, the six-shipgirl fleet sailed through the waters around Okinoshima under cloudless skies.

The enemy anchorage was within sight. Fortunately, the fleet had broken through after only three engagements.

They had not encountered the feared newtype Wo. The strongest force they had met thus far was a surface fleet led by a single Battleship. It had not lasted long under the Cranes' airstrikes and the Ise-class's shells, inflicting little more than scratch damage in return.

It was for that exact reason that Zuikaku's suspicion and unease swelled higher than ever.

(Well, we've been pretty lucky so far....but sooner or later we're going to run into the main force...)

The Main Fleet garrisoning the Okinoshima anchorage was an enemy not even the naval district's elites could overcome. Zuikaku didn't know if a chance for victory even existed.

(Speaking of which, I wonder why they even bothered to send a rookie like me....I'm not skilled like Shoukaku-nee...)

She knew, of course, that Okinoshima Anchorage could well decide the tide of the war; she also knew that this war could not be lost. However--

(In that case, why me? Shoukaku-nee should know I'm not experienced enough...)

At this rate, she might very well be the reason this sortie would come to fail. She couldn't take on an enemy that could defeat Akagi and Kaga...

"U-uh, Shoukaku-nee....."

Zuikaku's misgivings were obvious in her inquiry:

"Why did you agree to sortie with this fleet? Compared to me, Hiyou or Junyou are more...."

"You are a standard carrier. Lack of experience does not alter the fact that you are stronger in every regard than a light carrier."

"Even so, this kind of decision is too strange! You knew that, Shoukaku-nee, but agreed to sortie anyway, right?"

Shoukaku gazed at the distant seas in silence in lieu of response.

"This is no different than a suicide mission then! Even if our luck has brought us this far....SHoukaku-nee!"

Shoukaku's brow furrowed as she opened her mouth calmly.

"Listen carefully, Zuikaku. You may have an ability the other shipgirls do not have."

"Eh? Shoukaku-nee, what are you saying out of nowhere...."

"We shipgirls and our participation as warships in 'That War' doesn't just fetter our hearts--it constrains our fate as well."

There was a ferocity in Shoukaku's voice as she spoke that kept Zuikaku silent.

"We have yet to prove this empirically--but this has long since gone from conjecture to theory. Those who were fortunate in 'That War' are consistently hit less, while those whose endings were more tragic are hit more--you have noticed this trend, have you not?"

"How could that be? That's just coincidence..."

Even as Zuikaku responded doubtfully, she was struck by the truth in Shoukaku's words.

That first battle with Kaga; all the fleet exercises in which she had participated until now; that first deployment last week--every single time, her evasion was significantly higher than Shoukaku's, especially given the difference in skill between them. Given, this could still plausibly be attributed to coincidence and Zuikaku's own exertions--in spite of that, she could not honestly say that she had never wondered whether luck had played any role.

Thinking carefully, the situation was similar here. They had successfully evaded the Carrier Task Force with its New Type Wo and was now closing in on the enemy's main fleet garrison.

The name given to Zuikaku flashed through Zuikaku's mind--"the Lucky Carrier."

Shoukaku continued her explanation carefully.

"To put it another way, the actions and events of 'that war' are directly related to our own fortunes. And you, the one who bears the title of 'the lucky carrier,' may well possess the power to grasp the most fortunate result."

Zuikaku's face was drawn--she had of course been aware of her status as 'the lucky carrier.' But she had never connected her

name to something like 'the power to grasp the most fortunate result.'"

"Once the naval district had assembled several dozen shipgirls and the conflict with the abyssals had intensified, everyone gradually started to notice this fact. Of course, the Admiral (whose only knowledge of 'That War' is through us) and those who brought us to the Admiral in the hopes of saving this nation know this. Therefore, isn't considering these shipgirls as trump cards the natural conclusion?"

"How can this--"

To try to grasp something as intangible and unquantifiable as "karma" and use it as a weapon--there was a certain grimness in this train of thought.

Hyuuga, Ise, Maya and Choukai listened to Shoukaku's explanation wordlessly without a word of objection--that is, they, too, agreed with Shoukaku.

"More likely than not, this sortie is most likely related to this. If you, the one known as 'The Lucky Carrier' is here, perhaps we may be able to defeat the enemy's formidable main fleet. The possibility that you may grasp the power to reach the most fortunate result is more than enough justification in this uncertain war. Though I don't know whether this is the Admiral's thoughts or just ours...."

"How can you do this so recklessly.....?!"

Zuikaku shouted, holding back tears.

"Even if you tell me this, it's useless...! Maybe I am the 'Lucky Carrier', but that's only because I gave it my all....!"

"I understand your feelings. Nobody would ever wish to have his or her achievements dismissed as nothing more than 'luck.' In truth, you have been working hard this whole time....however, even if you factor in your hard work, there is an unavoidable and self-evident connection to luck."

In response to Zuikaku's expression, contorted with sorrow, Shoukaku comforted her with a kind smile.

"Don't worry, I will protect you. No matter what happens, that will always be true...after all, I probably received this life in order to ensure that yours continues."

"Shoukaku-nee...?"

As Zuikaku slowly uttered her elder sister's name, understanding hit her, understanding of a great many things.

Compared to herself, the one known in "That War as "The Lucky Carrier," her sister had been teased as the "Unlucky Ship," if memory served.

Through multiple carrier force engagements, Zuikaku was usually the only one to escape successfully, while Shoukaku was always the one who limped back home wounded. Allegedly some believed that Zuikaku had stolen Shoukaku's fortune.

Shoukaku's experiences as a shipgirl until now probably could not be divorced from her fate. Perhaps it was because of this that she desired to protect Zuikaku, the "Lucky Carrier." Perhaps she had used her status as the frequently-hit "Unlucky Ship" to divert the enemy's attacks--

(How can it be...Shoukaku-nee!)

"Scout Plane transmission--enemy fleet detected, close proximity! Contact in less than a minute!"

Ise reported from the front. The Ise-class Aviation Battleships carried seaplane hangars and a flight deck, allowing them to participate both in surface shelling and air combat.

Before the confused Zuikaku could even come up with a response, Shoukaku laid down the law.

"All ships, prepare for surface combat! Zuikaku, let's get our first wave up there!"

"...sheeit."

"Well?"

"U-understood!"

Disoriented and at her wits end, Zuikaku responded loudly. She raised her shortbow to the skies and left fly mechanically, waiting for her carrier planes to form up.

Ise spoke again with a tone of shock.

"Scout plane, second report--enemy fleet consists of four Battleships, two destroyers! One of which is a yet-unidentified ノル-class Battleship!"

Ise's report was enough to send a tremor of shock through the shipgirls.

In the previous battles, the abyssals had never deployed a fleet in which four of the six ships had been Battleships. Add to that a

hitherto-unidentified battleship--the enemy clearly had the overwhelming advantage in firepower. If they were to swing the battle in their direction, they'd need to rely on air power to dispatch the opponent.

(Can we really do something like this...?)

Most likely it was this fleet that had devastated Akagi and Kaga. Could she surmount this obstacle--

(Even so, all we can do...!)

"Here we go--all planes, lock your S-foils in attack position!"

Under Shoukaku's orders, the assembled carrier formation flew at the enemy fleet, visible on the horizon as the carrier planes began their attack runs.

"Hit----!"

As if in response to Zuikaku's roar, multiple geysers erupted around the enemy fleet. Zuikaku focused on the enemy fleet to assess the situation.

As the pillars of water subsided, Zuikaku could barely voice her shock.

"How....!"

The enemy fleet was virtually unharmed. The carrier planes, now returning, had also been heavily damaged by enemy AA fire. As the enemy had no fighters, the Zero fighters may as well have been nonexistent.

Shoukaku rebuked Zuikaku quickly, face drawn white.

"Zuikaku, hurry up and reform the carrier planes! We can still get off our second wave and hit them some more! So--"

The low rumble of gunfire in the distance--the enemy fleet had began shelling. Each battleship fired in series, forming an unending rumble of cannonfire. Moreover, they were firing outside of the range of Ise and Hyuuga's main guns, outside of effective range.

"Firing in series? At this kind of range?" [\[51\]](#)

Ise shouted in surprise. Nothing followed previous abyssal procedure. Normally, the abyssals would close to short range before letting a volley loose.

"What are they thinking....!"

The AP shells closed in, unaware and uninterested in Ise's wails. From the first shot, the shells had already taken well over thirty seconds--no, even longer given that they were firing in series.

"....! Ise, Hyuuga! Evasive action!"

As if struck by some new discovery, Shoukaku shouted.

"The enemy's trying to prevent us from responding effectively by hitting us with a steady barrage while closing in! At this rate...!"

And suddenly, it was as Shoukaku had predicted, an increasingly dense net of water pillars surrounded Hyuuga and Ise, so dense that Zuikaku could not even see the two. At this rate, aiming by eye would be impossible. This was a tactic that made use of the sheer

number of guns four battleships could bring to bear, quite rational
really--

"Ise, Hyuuga!"

Shoukaku called in despair. At the same time, Zuikaku turned her head to the right in response to a wave of murderous intent--and immediately shouted a belated warning.

"Shoukaku-nee! Two destroyers, starboard--and torpedo wakes!
Lots of them! It's too late!"

".....!"

Perhaps built specifically to counter the human-sized but highly mobile shipgirls, a host of torpedos closed in at astonishing speed in a spread that the two sisters could not possibly evade in its entirety. They were already closing in.

(Even if it's me, I can't do it....!)

Hopelessness weighed down Zuikaku's heart--yet, a moment later she spotted Shoukaku, right hand raised and seemingly uninterested in evasion. Above Shoukaku's head were only about ten planes--the half-assembled second attack wave--

"Second wave, aim for the torpedos--prioritize Zuikaku's safety!"

"Shoukaku-nee!"

Turning to Zuikaku's cries, Shoukaku smiled gently.

The Meaning of Luck (Part 2)

Part 1

The midsummer's sun streamed through the wide-open window into the Naval District Office.

The trees surrounding the Naval District hummed with the "SZAZAKARAIISUUUU*" of ten thousand cicadas as the fan in the corner valiantly pushed along the hot air. This nation's summer is just like the summer we know, it's very hot.

The Admiral brought me here about a month after I had come to this Naval District, on a certain afternoon.

"Regarding the Confirmation you wanted, Shoukaku, the report has arrived."

The Admiral sat in front of me, hand lying on a document spread over the desk, speaking with a sigh.

"Your theory has been validated by the evidence. You indeed sustain significantly more hits than other carriers--even if we consider 'Luck', this is still the case. In other words..."

"I am still constrained by the title of 'The Unlucky Ship'--correct?"

I cut through the Admiral with my own voice--from an Admiral's standpoint, these words were probably hard to say.

"...This kind of judgement certainly isn't surprising."

As predicted, the Admiral responded apologetically. I smiled mildly at him as always, telling him not to take it to heart.

I had long since come to terms with this.

From the moment I was born as a shipgirl, it had been like this.

It was because I, like some of the shipgirls, had clear memories of "That War."

It was not altogether surprising that would have to bear results and a legacy as a shipgirl identical to those memories.

Listening to the report at the Admiral's side, secretary-ship Houshou-nee bore a complicated expression.

"But, this way you'll..."

There was clear sorrow in the Admiral's voice. I shook my head.

"It's not a problem. After all, I have my own hopes."

"Hopes?"

"I wish to avoid bringing my misfortune onto others--that and that only."

"....."

"What happens to me is unimportant. No matter how many wounds I sustain, how many times I have to retreat, I don't mind. But I do not wish to lose anyone on account of this. This is my sole wish as a shipgirl."

"Are you worried about your demise in that 'Battle of the Marianas' you speak of?"

"I wouldn't be able to forget something like that even if I tried."

I spoke with a hint of self-mockery. Even now, I occasionally dream of what happened then.

It had been a torpedo, striking while the air groups were being refueled. A diesel leak triggered an explosion that lit me on fire. Those who did not burn were swallowed by the waves, life after life vanishing before me--unfortunately, I remembered all that with perfect clarity.

Nearly three out of four crewmen had died--some fifteen hundred. Among the Standard Carriers, this was one of the most tragic of figures.

Perhaps that was why.

Or perhaps it was my lingering worry for new model carrier Taihou and my sister Zuikaku, both of whom would subsequently perish in the line of duty, that caused it.

I do not want to bring misfortune on anyone again. I hope that this time I can protect what is important to me.

Even if it means repeating my fate in 'That War' and ending my days at the bottom of the sea.

As long as my death has meaning, has value.

"With that in mind, why don't we hurry to bring Zuikaku--my sister, the one renowned in 'That War' as the illustrious 'Lucky Carrier' to the Naval District?"

I maintained my smile as I spoke with firm words.

"That child should be the same as me, bearing the legacy of 'the Lucky Carrier'. As long as she becomes a main fleet standard carrier, she will be of great assistance to this naval district."

And so, clutching conviction to heart, I told the Admiral,

"And before that happens, leave it to me to protect Zuikaku. Even if I have to be her shield, I will definitely..."

If I bear the legacy of that war, after all, I ought to be the one to draw the enemy to me when she is in danger, just like back then.



Awoken by past worries, Shoukaku lay in a daze.

She knew where she was--in her room in the naval district, on her futon. The Warm winter sun peeked through the window as the frigid wind shook the forest restlessly.

But she did not understand why she was here.

"If I recall correctly, I was in the waters around Okinoshima, and in order to protect ZUikaku..."

She recalled the torpedo wakes as they rushed at her and Zuikaku.

Though she had been the flagship at the time, her attention had been drawn by the four battleships, and so the destroyers had managed to close in unnoticed and release their deadly payload. If she had done nothing, both she and Zuikaku would have been stricken by multiple torpedoes with doubtlessly heavy and (with some bad luck) potentially fatal damage.

It was exactly because of that she had instructed the half-formed 2nd air group to intervene from their location between Zuikaku and the incoming torpedos and block what they could.

Given, she could have attempted to both direct her planes and evade as Zuikaku in the Orel Sea--but this would divide her attention and potentially prevent her from accomplishing either objective.

When Taihou came under torpedo attack during the battle of the Marianas, one of the Suisei had rammed a torpedo, sacrificing his life to block the attack. While he failed and Taihou was ultimately sunk by that torpedo spread, she could definitely succeed--and it was for this reason that she acted as she did.

(However, I only released some ten or so planes--a little too few for all those torpedos. That's why I came to terms with taking a few torps....)

Shoukaku looked at her bathrobed body. Perhaps she was lucky after all--her body bore not a single wound. From the wintry scene outside, it seemed as if little time had passed since the battle in the Okinoshima waters.

Out of nowhere, a wave of unease struck her.

(My survival means...)

She was the "unlucky ship." What if this legacy had targeted the Admiral or the other shipgirls? If Zuikaku's luck was an insufficient defense--

Her oath to the Admiral flashed through her mind.

".....! Zui--"

"Shoukaku-nee!"

The doors slammed open as destroyer Yukikaze stepped into the room--and then stopped, as if transfixed with shock.

"I-I'm really sorry! Shoukaku-nee was still sleeping....!"

That's fine, I was just about to get up."

Shoukaku smiled to calm Yukikaze, as she did to reassure Zuikaku.

"Well then, what happened?"

"Yes, Zuikaku-onee, she--"

"Zuikaku? Is Zuikaku alright...?"

Shoukaku bolted up, shoving her covers aside.

Yukikaze's gaze turned from Shoukaku elsewhere as she spoke with a voice of apology.

"She's fine, but...."

Part 2

"Do you think this is some kind of joke?!"

Zuikaku shouted in rage.

The location was the Naval District office. Zuikaku had only just returned yesterday with her wounded comrades.

Having called her over, the Admiral now sat behind the desk in front of her. No secretary ship stood by his side, and no other shipgirls were present--a one-on-one standoff.

Zuikaku slammed a hand on the table, her expression filled with rage as she bellowed.

"You want me to attack Okinoshima again? And with Shoukaku-nee too--what the hell is wrong with you? There's--"

--A main fleet built around four Ru-classes garrisoned there, a force stronger than anything we have faced."

As if to complete Zuikaku's thought, the Admiral interjected with an emotionless tone.

"And among those four Ru-classes, there is a new model--after that battle, we have named it the 'Flagship Type.'"

"Well then if you already know....!"

"Moreover, those four battleships are attempting a new tactic, trying to surround us with water pillars by firing in series and trying to obscure our line of sight--Suppression Shelling, essentially. I assume that means they are equipped with the newest Radars."

The Admiral spoke in a firm tone that proscribed any interruption.

"Range seemed equivalent to that of the Nagato-class...if they were normal Battleships they'd went straight for the kill. In night battle, the disparity in accuracy may well become even more pronounced."

".....!"

"It's exactly because of this that we are betting our hopes on the power of you carriers. Carrier planes can strike from beyond their fearsome firing range and attack those four battleships from beyond the horizon. Currently, the Naval District and Factory is operating at full capacity, stockpiling resources and equipment for this sortie."

From beginning to end, the Admiral spoke with icy calm.

"This may well be the last chance given to us. Reconnaissance shows that enemy patrols have increased in both activity and patrol radius. Do you know what that means?"

Zuikaku felt a chill travel down her spine.

"That the main fleet is preparing to make their move against home base...?"

"It's possible that this Naval District is their target. If, by any chance, the Abyssals are not the regrets of 'That War' but the fate of shipgirls who have sank, it would not be surprising if they knew the location of this Naval District."

Zuikaku's expression was bleak--while it was certainly possible, she would rather have left it unsaid.

"...and it is precisely due to this that I plan to dispatch you sisters of the 5thCarDiv. Thankfully, you only sustained minor damage. 1stCarDiv and 2ndCarDiv's standard carriers have yet to fully

recover--they are unlikely to be capable of sortieing in the near future; the same goes for Mutsu and the other Battleships. Currently, the only ship that can take them on are you two."

"....you can try to convince me with your arguments, but the reality is nothing like that."

Zuikaku tightly gripped the desk as she glared at the Admiral.

"Why do you believe that I could take on monsters like those? Shoukaku-nee and my survival and return...."

As she spoke, her recollection of the Battle at Okinoshima floated into her mind.



"Shoukaku-nee--!"

Even as Zuikaku cried out her warning, Shoukaku was engulfed in multiple water spouts, briefly shielding her from view.

What happened was obvious--Shoukaku had used the carrier planes above her to target the torpedo spread, simultaneously using her body to shield Zuikaku from the remaining torpedos. Just like she had resolved to do before the battle.

"A,ah...."

Zuikaku shook wordlessly, simply staring as the curtain of geysers receded. As expected, Shoukaku could not have stopped all the torpedos; several shot past on either side of her--even so, Zuikaku was completely unharmed.

(H-how...how can this be...!)

Zuikaku felt the hopelessness seeping through her spirit. As it was, she may as well have been the one that had sank Shoukaku--living up to the name of the 'lucky carrier', she had sacrificed the 'unlucky ship' for her own survival.

(I never asked for this! I just wanted to fight to save this world....!)

The pillars of water slowly collapsed--revealing to Zuikaku a figure collapsed like the geysers around her.

"Shoukaku-nee!"

Zuikaku hurried rushed over as she lifted Shoukaku from where she lay on the water's surface.

Shoukaku's body was covered in wounds, her equipment virtually destroyed--it seemed not a single carrier plane had survived. But she was alive--Shoukaku had once said that shipgirls would float, as long as they remained alive.

(Thank god! But, why...?)

Even as she cried tears of joy, Zuikaku felt a smidgen of unease. Even if Shoukaku carrier planes had managed to reduce the torpedos coming at her, the remainder should have been more than enough to finish her in her current state. And yet, Shoukaku had managed to just barely hold on.

Presently, several carrier planes flew over at low altitude. These planes bore floats--they weren't Shoukaku's, at any rate.

It seemed like this seaplane team had joined Shoukaku in attacking the torpedos, saving her life in the process.

(Seaplanes? It can't be...?)

--are you alright, 5thCarDiv Sisters?"

The voice in her ear--a radio transmission. And that voice belonged to--"

"Ise-onee?"

This transmission came from Aviation Battleship Ise. Zuikaku gaped at Ise and Hyuuga, astonished.

Ise and Hyuuga evaded the continued fire from the four Ru-classes and the pillars of water surrounding them.

Both had sustained several direct hits and several near misses and the wounds to prove it--their protective barriers were also in tatters. But they continued moving as they evaded shell after shell. While they moved as sluggishly as their status as battleships implied, they moved spryly, dodging only after the enemy had fired.

(So even at Cape Engano....!)

Breathless, Zuikaku remembered the last scenes she had witnessed of "That War."

The Battle of Engano where she sank had been the last decisive battle for her side--the carrier battle of the Leyte Gulf. Ise and Hyuuga had been responsible for the protection of four carriers, led by Zuikaku, committing themselves to a harrowing anti-air battle.

The battle had ended in disaster for the Japanese--all four carriers were lost. But Ise and Hyuuga had managed to shrewdly evade the enemy planes' waves of attacks, surviving a battle from which no survivors were expected. Watching these two shipgirls now, it seemed as if they had inherited that agility, so unlike those of battleships.

Ise's voice rose urgently.

"--is Shoukaku fine? We're falling back now--we of the 4thCarDiv will form the rearguard, you 5thCarDiv sisters hurry up and scram!"

"To leave in this situation....?"

"We just received orders from the Admiral! We've finally managed to unmask the enemy Main Fleet's true face--given how the battle is going, we have no option but to retreat...!"

Zuikaku found that her blood was rising far faster than her relief.

(Doesn't that mean that we were sent just to scout out the enemy's composition...!?)

From a certain point of view, this was a reasonable judgement and choice--even so, she could not accept it.

"--We of the 4thCarDiv's durability and evasion is more than enough, if it's just buying time against those four Battleships--now hurry up!"

"B-but, if that happens you'll..."

"Don't look underestimate the 4thCarDiv! Right, Hyuuga!"

"That's right. Let them witness the true power of the Aviation Battleships! Zuikaku, we'll definitely catch up with you--get going!"

The two bellowed, as if to reassure themselves.

At the same time, gunfire echoed in the distance--Maya and Choukai were engaging the Destroyers that had just launched the torpedo spread.

Zuikaku gulped. Currently, the enemy was completely focused elsewhere--

In her confusion, Zuikaku saw the wounded Shoukaku as an expression of anguish appeared across her face--it seemed she was trying to endure the pain. If she didn't escape, Shoukaku might sink.

"....sorry.....!"

Zuikaku lifted Shoukaku up as she started her retreat.



"The only reason we survived was because Ise-nee and Hyuuga-nee acted as our shields."

Zuikaku lowered her head with her remorseful admission.

"But after we made it out, those two returned with severe damage. Maya, Choukai and Shoukaku-nee were the same...that was the limit of our power."

"Our Higher-Ups believe that you, as the 'Lucky Carrier,' are needed in the fleet for us to have any chance of victory."

"....!"

Zuikaku glared once more at the Admiral, who took it in calmly.

"I'm sure Shoukaku has told you before of your ability as the 'Lucky Carrier' to grasp the most fortunate result. It's because of this status that we were given this last chance."

"'Lucky Carrier' this, 'Lucky Carrier' That....is everyone just treating me as an object to carry around?!"

Zuikaku leaned forwards as she shouted in rage. Something that she had been struggling to endure had finally boiled over.

"The power to grasp the most fortunate outcome? I never trusted your fucking luck, I just did my best! Don't just foist a role on me like that!"

"I have no objection with your explanation. But we need your power to save the world. The fact is that you managed to unveil the enemy's true face and successfully escaped with a wounded Shoukaku from the battle. Given your comparative combat ability, this result may as well be a miracle."

"So I was called here just for that, then? So I'm just a bloody lucky charm you carry around so the miracles come falling? Sacrificing Shoukaku-nee and the other shipgirls for some crap like that--this is a little too unreasonable!"

"....."

"The one who said that shipgirls aren't tools of war, wasn't that you, Admiral?"

"That's fine as well--this is a war, and sacrifices must sometimes be made."

"....."

"We must grab our fates with our own hands."

Nearly gasping in rage, Zuikaku couldn't stop herself from raising her shortbow. Of course, she didn't loose the carrier plane at the arrow's tip--but just a twitch of the finger, and the plane would immediately shoot at the Admiral.

The Admiral didn't move, but gazed back evenly with a resolve that stood up to Zuikaku's rage.

In spite of her teeth-grinding rage, Zuikaku didn't shoot--she couldn't shoot.

"Zuikaku, stop!"

A voice from behind her--Zuikaku turned around with shock to see Shoukaku staring at her, having thrown the office doors open. From the heaving of her shoulders, it appeared that she had rushed over as fast as she could.

"Shoukaku-nee..."

Zuikaku spoke gently. Shoukaku, who had been wounded protecting her, had returned. Joy, elation and guilt flashed through her mind--along with complicated feelings about Shoukaku's resolve.

However, Shoukaku approached Zuikaku soundlessly, snatching Zuikaku's shortbow--and then raising her right arm in a broad slap.



"....!"

"Apologize to the Admiral,"

Shoukaku said severely to Zuikaku, who touched her face in a daze.

"Apologize, now!"

"....! Didn't you lie to me too, Shoukaku-nee?!"

Shoukaku roared back reflexively, expelling all the regrets and depression that had followed that last battle in a single breath.

Don't say any more--saying any more would hurt Shoukaku-nee, another Zuikaku cautioned desperately. But Zuikaku wouldn't stop, couldn't stop.

"I won't sink again' my ass. Tossing out lies to reassure me and then try to sacrifice yourself for me...that's just like Dinosaurs! The one giving up against the title of 'the Unlucky Ship' is clearly you, Shoukaku-nee!"

"Zuikaku..."

"I don't want to be a lucky charm or a weapon of war--and I sure as hell don't want to be a reason for Shoukaku-nee to sacrifice herself!"

Zuikaku turned and ran, through the open door into the hall.

"Hold on, Zuikaku!"

Though her elder sister's remonstrances reached her, Zuikaku did not stop running.



Shoukaku did not run after Zuikaku.

No, she couldn't run after her.

Firstly, it was unlikely that Zuikaku in her current state would listen to her words. Secondly, she had lied, as Zuikaku had said. And as Zuikaku had said, she had chosen to accept her status as 'the Unlucky Ship' and do her best under the circumstances.

(But that's all I can do...)

Those experiences in "That War" culminating in the title of "The Unlucky Ship;" the high hit sustenance rate that had come with that title; that low hit rate, even though the experience and skill was clearly there--that was just how things were---she couldn't do anything about it.

"Thank you, Shoukaku--though I want to say that, are you alright now?"

The Admiral inquired as he let loose a sigh of relaxation. Shoukaku stood up straight, responding with head lowered.

"Yes, thanks to you. My apologies for letting you witness my willful sister's display."

"Don't worry about it. That kind of spirit is what your sister ought to have."

The Admiral responded as if it were nothing. It seemed like he had expected Zuikaku's response.

Shoukaku nodded slightly as she spoke with a careful tone:

"I've heard the gist of it from Yukikaze. Moreover, that exchange confirmed a guess of mine--deploying the 5thCarDiv to use Zuikaku's power of the 'Lucky Carrier' was the request of the higher-ups and not the Admiral, correct?"

The Admiral said nothing as he gazed at Shoukaku, his face clearly displeased.

(I was right, huh...)

Shoukaku held back her sigh. The Admiral had come to lead the Naval District due to political backing--this had been obvious from the missions up until now. Moreover, his political base was far from solid.

The intent of Shoukaku and Zuikaku's last sortie had probably been to "grasp their formation, even if you can't wipe out the main fleet." That intent could be seen in the choice of sortieing Ise and Hyuuga, both veterans skilled in evasion.

Moreover, if this had been the primary goal, there was no need to send her and Zuikaku. Indeed, throwing in a rookie such as Zuikaku was still very risky, "Lucky Carrier" or not.

Pushing forwards in spite of all this--it had to be pressure from the higher-ups.

(Even if it was only to satisfy the demands of the higher-ups, the Admiral still took full responsibility of everything related to us as our commander while resolving to maintain clear accountability. That's probably why he didn't say anything...)

Perhaps the Admiral had gleaned from the shipgirl's recollections of "That War" that a string of disasters had resulted from poor accountability.

After all, there was no need for a bunch of shipgirls balancing a war with the abyssals with daily life at the Naval District to understand the Admiral's political position regarding his higher ups. In a certain sense, this was also an attempt to protect the hearts of the shipgirls.

At the very least, this was what the Admiral had in mind when he fought.

Perhaps he had dealt so severely with Zuikaku so that Zuikaku could vent all the suspicions and questions remaining from the previous battle and allow her to confront her feelings.

(What a difficult man to understand.)

Shoukaku frowned disconsolately as she suppressed a sigh before voicing another one of her convictions.

"However, Admiral. The Admiral I know wouldn't repeat this kind of thing."

"....."

"Plus, this time around we're not deploying until we've completely grasped the Okinoshima Garrison Fleet's formation--I presume you have a plan then?"

As Shoukaku watched inquisitively, the Admiral broke into a chilling grin.

Part 3

"...aren't you a little full of yourself, moping alone here at a time like this?"

Standing on the seawall that snaked around the naval district shoreline, Hiyou inquired with an expression of confusion.

At her feet Zuikaku crouched slavically, her face and expression concealed by her legs.

After the argument in the naval district office, Zuikaku had run here from the naval district. At least there would be some time for solitude here--or so she had thought.

Unfortunately, her hopes proved naive. Zuikaku had only been here for a short time before Hiyou had started talking behind her. More likely than not, Hiyou had been sent by a certain someone in the naval district.

(After that debacle, I don't have the face to return to the naval district...)

Though she felt Hiyou come closer to her, Zuikaku's depression was not assuaged.

(I just wanted to work hard as a shipgirl, but....)

Not a single word Zuikaku had said to Shoukaku and the Admiral had been dishonest or untrue. Given, aiming her equipment at the admiral was a little overdone, but Zuikaku did not feel that she had said anything wrong.

Even so, a strong sense of regret lingered

(I spoke out of line with Shoukaku-nee...)

Undecided between standing uncomfortably and sitting uncomfortably, the young woman dug her thumbnails into herself.

(Shoukaku-nee clearly just wanted to protect me...she clearly just went through a situation that made her think as she did...)

Shoukaku had not escaped the wounds of "That War." Indeed, it was the very opposite--she was one of the ones to remember it the most vividly. And it was due to those experiences that she so selflessly tried to protect Zuikaku.

Shoukaku is the "unlucky ship", so she is hit more; Zuikaku is the "lucky carrier," so she brings her side good luck--if this theory becomes a rule, there would be no ship better suited to be "the ship in charge of being hit" than Shoukaku.

Moreover, if she truly possessed the power to grasp the best possible result, it was not illogical for the Naval District to prepare for a long war with the abyssals--

(But I hate this kind of thinking....)

To Zuikaku, Shoukaku was an irreplaceable sister, one which she could not bear to harm for her sake.

(Nevermind that I'm still a rookie. Even if I were given some responsibility like "grabbing the best possible result", I'd have not a clue how to do it...)

In the worst case scenario, no miracle would be triggered at all, and all the shipgirls with her except for herself would perish--it was certainly a possibility that Zuikaku considered.

(what should I do...?)

"Oy, are you listening to me?"

Hiyou spoke again from behind her, but Zuikaku wasn't interested in answering.

The silence persisted nearly a minute more--finally, Hiyou sighed. Sitting down next to Zuikaku, she started speaking, her gaze directed at the sea.

"I heard about it. And I'm also aware of that 'you may have a certain ability' crap too."

"....."

"I've always had Junyou by me, after all. That girl was an accomplished veteran in 'That War', and survived until the end...though it's not to your degree, it would not be unreasonable to call her a 'lucky carrier' as well. In reality, her hit sustenance rate in this war is indeed lower...to tell you the truth, I'm quite jealous."

"....."

"That's why I can understand Shoukaku's feelings, and your feelings to some extent. Junyou has always been forgiving of me, constrained as I am by tactics...while it is in part to prevent me from feeling inferior, I suspect Junyou simply doesn't want to consider the idea that 'she is lucky.' If we were always aware of our own fortunes, their results and that kind of business, we'd simply be incapable of getting along with our comrades."

She felt the same right now--that was what Zuikaku thought, her face hidden in her legs. In regards to Junyou's situation, her concern for Hiyou had already made that self-evident.

And yet after a pause, Hiyou spoke up again, with a harsher voice.

"But Junyou has never given up due to her situation. She had never used 'luck' or 'it was pre-ordained' as a pretext to give up."

".....!"

Hiyou had never rebuked Zuikaku like this before, and Zuikaku froze.

"I am the same. I am a light carrier who cannot compare with standard carriers, and I accomplished little worth mentioning in 'That War'....but so what? How can I bend my knee to luck and fate? Stuff like that, I'll toss them aside with this shining hand of mine!"

Hiyou's right hand, rock in hand, glowed with her magical onmyodo powers or some shit. With what may or may not have been sheer willpower, the air around Hiyou began to tremble.

"Hiyou...."

Zuikaku looked up slowly. In front of her, Hiyou stood up, clutching the stone in her hand.

Hiyou stared at the seaside as before. And yet the gaze that emanated from those purple eyes seemed to imbibe Hiyou's resolution.

(In other words, the Admiral basically said the same thing...)

One should decide her own fate--the Admiral had said this to her, back before Shoukaku had reached the office.

Thinking carefully, that phrase may have been the expression not of the Admiral and this world's faith, but that of a hope that could guide both Zuikaku, gradually fettered by the results of "That War," and Shoukaku, long since subjugated by them.

Furthermore, she was the "Lucky Carrier," the shipgirl that carried the power to "Grasp the best possible result"--perhaps she could end her connection to that past with her own hands. Given, this was an inherently contradictory train of thought, but this was a thought--

(Whether I truly grasp the power to grasp the most fortunate result and what the best possible result, I don't know...)

Hiyou's dark hair and red dress fluttered in the wind, but she resolutely stared out towards the sea as before--seeing her face, Zuikaku was struck with a thought.

(But the only one who can decide whether and how to use this power is I...if I use it right, perhaps it can be the power that saves everyone. Of course, Shoukaku-nee's heart is no exception...)

Even if she was the "Lucky Carrier," there was no need to truly confirm or deny this power.

The only way to avoid others sacrificing themselves for her was to use her power to solve those problems. If she didn't want to be a lucky charm or a weapon, what she needed to do was, again, to change herself, with her own power.

Of course, Zuikaku knew neither the specifics nor whether she could actually save Shoukaku's heart. Hell, the fetters binding

herself with Shoukaku may well be broken--on this point, Zuikaku felt both fear and unease.

But perhaps there would be a way, as long as she gave it her all as before. After all, the title of 'the lucky carrier' shouldn't be an empty title--

"The sparkle seems to have returned to your eyes...go!"

Cracking into a slightly teasing grin, Hiyou hurled the stone in her right hand towards the sea. Perhaps it had something to do with Hiyou's magical Onmyoudou powers, but the stone continued to skip off the water's surface until it was lost in the waves.

"Fucking beautiful,"

Hiyou remarked cheerfully. She turned again towards Zuikaku.

"Really now, at this rate you're going to befoul the name of the 5thCarD...rather, the new 1stCarDiv. We were the ones propping up the Main Fleet Carrier Task Force after Midway; get it together."

Zuikaku scratched her cheek with a crooked grin.

"Ahaha, well, there were a lot of reasons..."

Though she had patched up her feelings, the "Okinoshima Main Garrison Fleet blocking us" remained an obstacle.

In order to deal with that main fleet, she'd most likely have to deploy as before with Shoukaku.

And before that could be done, some new tactics would need to be devised. Zuikaku did not believe her fortune would be enough on its own against such strong enemies.

"But how should I say this...well, I feel a lot better now. Thanks! Thanks for coming here just to cheer me up!"

"I-I wasn't giving my advice for your sake!"

Clearly embarrassed Hiyou waved the thanks away.

"This is for the whole Naval District...and the Admiral!"

"Admiral?"

"After all, he asked me in the past to take care of you in my own way. I just happened to see you run out of the naval district and remembered this...."

"Is that so..."

For all her surprise, Zuikaku also felt slightly apologetic.

Perhaps the Admiral had long since foreseen this situation and had dispatched Hiyou to deal with this istuation.

Perhaps he had spoken earlier with such a harsh tone in order to help her grasp this current line of logic. Or perhaps he had hoped he could personally change Shoukaku's sense of self-sacrifice--

(But how could I have figured something like that out?! If he had said it clearly...)

"Moreover, Junyou and I are being deployed to the Okinoshima waters as well."

"Hiyou and Junyou too?"

Zuikaku gaped in astonishment. It seemed like the Admiral had abandoned surface combat and had resolved to deal with the enemy's fearsome main fleet with air power.

"That's right. As such, wouldn't it be a problem if a fleet comrade were all depressed? That's why it's for myself too--definitely not for your sake! After all, the New 1stCarDiv and the new 2ndCarDiv are rivals, and I'm not about to get all lovey dovey with you!"

"I-is that so..."

Hiyou huffily crossed her arms. Zuikaku, figuring that Hiyou was trying to hide her embarrassment,^[52] broke into laughter as she tried to move on.

"Whatever, let's not worry about that for now--we need to think of some strategies..."

Hiyou's eyes turned once more to the oceans.

"I've already seen your battle report. The enemy main fleet's core are the four Ru-class battleships, one of which is a flagship-type that's stronger than the elite-type. Once caught in the enemy's continuous fire the situation deteriorates dramatically, so we must devise a way by which we can eliminate the vast majority of the opponents within the opening air attack. However..."

Hiyou stopped at this point. Thinking of the unspoken implications, Zuikaku could not suppress a pang of regret.

During the battle with the enemy main force, she and Shoukaku had both launched a first wave. Though all had reached the enemy's airspace, fierce AA fire had prevented them from inflicting any significant damage.

(From the intensity of the AA fire, it's possible that even the next-generation Suisei dive bombers and Tenzan torpedo bombers currently in development would be insufficient to break through the barrage)

"While I'm sure the Admiral has some good ideas..."

Hiyou whispered with a mix of anticipation and unease.

If it was impossible to obtain decisive victory through the air, the next time may well still end in a defeat. Not only would this defeat give the enemy main fleet a chance to approach the homeland, but it could also make possible the worst-case scenario of an attack on the Naval District, a battle which could decide the progress of the war in a single moment.

At that moment, an unfamiliar engine rumble reached the silent Zuikaku and Hiyou.

"That engine sound...could it be?"

Zuikaku had heard this sound before--at the Marianas, her own air complement had included planes that had bore these engines.

(Ahh, these were the engines of the new model recon Saiun...but, those numbers are too large for a recon team....!)

"Zuikaku, look...!"

Zuikaku turned to where Hiyou's finger pointed--and immediately understood.

These carrier planes bore a graceful streamlined shape and a distinctive inverted gull-wing layout, wings that tapered up from the fuselage to the tip. There were enough planes to mount two carriers, and their reverberating engine sounds belonged to the scaled down but high-powered Nakajima Homare engine. The plane squadrons shot over the two at high speed.

(I once heard rumors of that fuselage during "That War...!")

Capabilities surpassing the Type 99 Dive bomber and the Type 97 Torpedo Bomber--or even the Suisei Dive bomber and Tenzan Torpedo bombers; a plane that combined dive bombing and torpedo bombing capabilities in a new revolutionary design allegedly fast enough to outstrip the Type 21 Zero.

She had never mounted this decisive-battle, blueprint weapon in "That War", but she had one day hoped for that chance. The weapon "So advanced that it had to remain classified" Yuubari mentioned, maybe it was this.

It's name is--

"The Sienar Fleet Systems TIE Line Fighter...!"

The Admiral recalled the Admiral's words--if it were Carriers, they would be able to attack the four Ru-class from outside their range. The Naval District and Factories had been working at double speed to churn out the necessary supplies and equipment--indeed, the Ryuusei-kai was a standout design. If two standard carrier's worth of Ryuusei Kai could be manufactured, even the enemy main fleet, with its powerful AA suite, might still take mortal damage.

Combined with her own luck, perhaps--

(That's the 5thCarDiv is needed, and that's why I am needed...)

Watching the Ryuusei Kai squadrons flying into the distance, Zuikaku felt a surge of hot blood rush through her veins.

Part 4

Several hours later, Zuikaku received the official sortie order.

"I will now explain the details of the new operation."

The Admiral's voice reverberated through the Naval District Office. The skies framed in the window had long since gone black.

Inside the office were assembled the four carriers notified about their role--Zuikaku, Shoukaku, Hiyou and Junyou.

Zuikaku kept her distance from Shoukaku--she was not quite sure how to face her elder sister. Shoukaku, it seemed, was of a similar sentiment, and both of them made sure their eyes would not meet.

"As everyone is well aware, our naval district's last assault on the Okinoshima Anchorage was an abject failure, with well over half the main fleet heavily damaged by the enemy. We now believe that the enemy main fleet anchored until now at the anchorage is preparing for an invasion of the mainland."

Several fairies promptly suck a strategic map onto a whiteboard standing on the workdesk.

"If we leave the enemy free rein, our homeland and this Naval District will most likely come under attack. We must prevent this

from happening at all costs. As such, we will be deploying with you all serving as the main fleet in a Carrier Task Force capacity to the Okinoshima Waters for a third attack. This operation will be referred to as 'Operation A-go.'"

Zuikaku gulped. The name of this operation was familiar.

(The Operation that led to the battle at the Marianas was also called Operation A-go.)

In "That War" and in this war, A-go represented the commitment to a decisive battle.

"This time we will be betting our hopes on you four carriers preemptively neutralizing the enemy in order to nullify the enemy's suppressing fire."

The Admiral explained in a heavier voice.

"Thanks to previous developments at the factories, we have manufactured sufficient quantites of the prototype Suisei Kai to outfit two carriers. Standard Carriers Shoukaku and Zuikaku will mount these Suisei Kai, along with Type 52 Zeroes, as the fleet's primary striking force. Due to the limited number of Type 52 Zeroes, however, Zuikaku's remaining supplement will be equipped with Type 62 Zeroes."

Zuikaku nodded slightly. As Yuubari and RJ had said in the factories, the Type 62 Zeroes were variations of the base Type 52 Zero model--if you could deal with their slightly inferior specs, they were more than capable of seizing air superiority. When it came to battle against the main force, they would also be able to serve in a dive bombing capacity.

"Hiyou and Junyou will deploy as always with Type 21 Zeroes, Type 99 Dive Bombers and Type 97 Torpedo Bombers. However, we will be limiting the numbers of Type 99s, which will be primarily used as scouts. In combat, we will rely on the Type 97s. The Type 99's dive bombs may be ineffective against the Ru-class."

Hiyou and Junyou both responded with a crisp "understood."

"As for the enemy patrols and pickets, please remove them with preemptive air strikes to the best of your ability. Looking at their composition, you should have more than enough to wrest air superiority. As long the enemy is disabled, it is acceptable to disengage and move on."

The enemy's gate is down--that was what the Admiral's gaze said.

"Once the enemy main force is encountered, focus everything on the first attack. Even if the enemy is Ru-class, breaking the enemy's formation with torpedos should help to inhibit their suppression fire. Your primary target is the Flagship Ru-class that appears to be serving as flagship. As before, sinking the flagship should plunge the leaderless enemy into confusion."

The fairies promptly affixed several photos of the flagship type [53] on the whiteboard. A few of Hyuuga and Ise's observation seaplanes had managed to survive, and these photos appeared to have been brought back thanks to their actions.

As the Admiral said, the Flagship Ru-class had indeed stood in front of the enemy fleet; it seemed like that she was indeed the coordinator.

"In the case that a preemptive strike fails, chances will be that you will lose the ability to inhibit their suppressing fire and thus suffer

defeat. If that happens, the enemy will close in on the homeland. If this happens, the Naval District will deploy into Home Waters in preparation for a last-ditch defense."

It didn't require much thought to realize that there was no plan at that point. If they failed, the Naval District's home fleet would consist of Heavy Cruisers and other smaller vessels. At that point, the battle plan would be encroaching on the nation's vital naval trade network.

"The flagship this time will be Shoukaku--as before. Are there any questions?"

The Admiral looked to the four shipgirls. It appeared he wanted each of them to imagine the consequences of the failure of their last stand.

"Just one."

Shoukaku raised her hand. There was no smile on her face now, only grimness. The Admiral tipped his head lightly, beckoning her to speech.

"As the flagship, there is something I would like to confirm with the Admiral in regards to this operation: when it comes down to it, is our priority 'our survival,' or 'the elimination of the enemy main fleet?'"

(Shoukaku-nee....)

Zuikaku gazed at Shoukaku and the Admiral uncomfortably. Similarly, Hiyou and Junyou also eyed the two with tension written across their faces.

"....of course, our priority is to eliminate the enemy main fleet."

The Admiral's voice was low, but clear.

"If we fail this battle, we will have lost the war. If the price for destroying the enemy main force is your lives, I, as a commanding officer, am prepared to pay."

His distress was palpable in his voice as he continued.

"However, I forbid any of you from entering battle with this resolve. There is a high likelihood that you all will be integral to our battles in the future; as such, I demand (however unreasonably) that you defeat the enemy and return to this naval district. Fight, fight with every ounce of your soul against the enemy against you. Whatever the result, I am prepared to take full responsibility."

"I understand. Thank you."

Shoukaku nodded lightly as Zuikaku felt a pang of guilty.

Her sister had doubtlessly brought up this question to make sure Zuikaku understood the Admiral's thoughts. The Admiral had no plans to use the shipgirls as weapons. Given, some decisions may have seemed the opposite, but for the Admiral, this remained a heart-rending decision--

(I understand this kind of thing....but, Shoukaku-nee...)

"Moreover, regarding the remaining two ships..."

"I was just about to explain that. Come in, you two."

The office door swung open with a heavy clack as from it came the shapes of two rather small shipgirls. Zuikaku's eyes widened--one of the two destroyers wore a white sailor uniform as a large dress, with a pair of large binoculars hanging from her neck. The other shipgirl wore a black-on-white sailor uniform, her hair an opulent, striking white.

Zuikaku gulped. She had seen these two destroyers before, and found what she had in common with them.

(It can't be, these two are...)

The Admiral's voice echoed through the office.

"Destroyers Yukikaze and Hibiki. They are this naval district's most seasoned destroyers, and I am confident they are up to the task of escorting you all."

The Admiral paused for a moment before regarding the six shipgirls before speaking a half-plea, half-order.

"Please, use your power as shipgirls to give us humans a future."

Part 5

The skies above the waters around Okinoshima were as clear as always.

Zuikaku and company sailed under the dazzling sun at full speed ahead.

Ten hours had elapsed since their departure from their naval district, and it had been two hours ago that they had left the transport ship and officially began their deployment. They had

encountered the enemy three times and taken only scratch damage--and now only the main fleet was ahead of them. It appeared that someone out there had been looking out for them on this route as well.

The fleet was split into two units, with destroyers Yukikaze and Hibiki forming a vanguard for Zuikaku, Shoukaku, Hiyou and Junyou's main force. The vanguard served as both an advance force and, on enemy encounter, bait.

The six shipgirls remained silent. The impending approach of the enemy main fleet seemed to bring about a pressure that lapsed even Junyou into silence. Hiyou and Shoukaku did not need mentioning.

Zuikaku, too, had yielded to this pervading feeling.

(This is kind of bad...)

She felt a throb in her chest. Under this atmosphere it was questionable whether they'd be able to make use of their full power even if they met with the enemy.

(But I don't know how to solve this...)

She looked to Shoukaku--Shoukaku, as in the battle before, gazed forwards, her expression tight.

Looking back, Zuikaku had not said a word to Shoukaku through deployment--partly because she didn't know what to say, and partly because she still did not know how to change Shoukaku's resolve.

Doubtlessly, the current Shoukaku would willing sacrifice herself for her. After all, this was operation "A-go," the last chance for the

Naval District to take out the Okinoshima Enemy Anchorage. Given the fact that the fate of the homeland would be determined by the results of this battle, the situation could not be more serious.

(But I really just don't want to see Shoukaku-nee like this...)

Zuikaku noticed that she gripped the shortbow in her right hand abnormally tightly.

(I wish fortune to Shoukaku-nee too...I wish that her smile is not just a reassurance for my sake, but from her heart. Or else...)

--Umm, Zuikaku-nee."

A wireless transmission from somewhere--it was destroyer Yukikaze. From Shoukaku's complete lack of response, it seemed as if Yukikaze had words for Zuikaku only.

"I read you. Go on, Yukikaze."

Zuikaku's lips barely moved, to avoid attracting Shoukaku's notice. She could secretly guess what Yukikaze wanted to talk about.

"Don't worry about it, everyone over here is really quiet, and I'm pretty bored. After all, we haven't discovered the enemy main force yet."

In reality, the fleet had already launched scouts in all directions--it would be unsurprising if the enemy was found at this very moment. Nevertheless, Zuikaku didn't want to silence Yukikaze.

--thank you. Hibiki is also listening to this transmission, is that alright?"

"No problem. Ah, also, sorry I didn't greet you guys yet. I'll be in your care today, Yukikaze, Hibiki."

"-Y-yes! Yukikaze will do her best!"

"Understood. Likewise."

The bipolarity of the two destroyer's response almost caused Zuikaku to burst into laughter.

"Well then, what do you guys want to ask me?"

--Okay. To be honest, we've been hiding something all this time from Zuikaku-nee, and we ought to apologize to you about it..."

"You two were observing me to see whether I was the 'Lucky Carrier' that could grasp the most fortunate outcome, right?"

"....! How did you...?"

"It'd be hard not to know."

Listening to Yukikaze's embarrassment, Zuikaku broke into a bitter smile.

"You two were watching with Akagi-senpai during my inaugural battle with Kaga-senpai, and I saw you guys during drills and exercises too. Oh, so Akagi-senpai is in on this too then? Ehh, she's even higher up in seniority than Shoukaku-nee. I suppose it was expected."

--Ehh, you got us..."

"Plus, isn't Yukikaze like me, a ship people figured would be able to grasp that most fortunate outcome? In 'That War' I also heard you being referred to as the 'Lucky Destroyer.' You survived until the end, too, so I figured..."

That last part was more instinct. From her occasional run-ins with Yukikaze, Zuikaku had noticed that she carried herself with an air unlike those of the other destroyers. An unburdened feeling, maybe. It was a vague term at best, but it was simultaneously different from the other shipgirls and similar to herself.

It was exactly because of this that Zuikaku figured that Yukikaze might be a shipgirl with similar abilities. Of course, this revelation came after the last sortie.

Akagi was the same. She was the Naval District's most senior standard carrier, and the shipgirl closest to the Admiral; there was no way she did not notice Zuikaku and Yukikaze's situation.

--t-that's right...as expected of Zuikaku-nee..."

Perhaps Zuikaku had been on target too many times, for Yukikaze responded with a tone of admiration that caused Zuikaku to again break into a crooked smile.

"Also, Hibiki must have also survived to the end of 'That War', and thus have known who in the naval district possessed the fruits of fortune....that's why you fight with Yukikaze, correct? And that's why Akagi-senpai asked you to take care of me...am I correct, Hibiki?"

Hibiki remained silent, but Zuikaku took that as affirmation.

"...that's why I'm not concerned about this kind of thing. Yukikaze doesn't need to apologize, and neither does Hibiki--both of you were simply doing your jobs, right? This is an issue between Shoukaku-nee and I."

--Don't you feel sad sometimes? Scared?"

From Yukikaze's tentative question, it seemed that the name of "The Lucky Destroyer" and the alleged ability to Grasp the Most Fortunate Outcome sat heavily on her shoulders.

"Of course, it's nothing to be happy about. But I won't stop here."

"....."

"If this power really exists, then I will use it where I need to. I want to protect Shoukaku-nee and stand beside her in battle. That's why I will do my best with all I have as before--that is how I feel."

--Zuikaku-nee...."

"That is what Yukikaze thinks as well, right?"

"....Yes."

Yukikaze responded hesitantly after several seconds of silence. That brief emptiness allowed Zuikaku to feel just how grim the road of the "Lucky Destroyer" was for Yukikaze.

(Yukikaze is most likely like me...)

--it might be strange to say 'because of this', but...I'll be leaving Shoukaku-nee to you."

From her position advancing into the distance, Yukikaze turned around to regard Zuikaku for a moment before continuing.

--Hibiki and I both survived 'That War,' and continued serving on active duty for a significant period afterwards, so we remember a bit of what happened after the war." [\[54\]](#)

"....."

--that's why it pains us to see a shipgirl as stubborn as Shoukaku-nee. True, 'That War' was a painful memory, both for us and our crews; even so, few hated or resented us, even as the losers. Shoukaku-nee's surviving crew probably felt the same, which is why..."

Yukikaze could not continue, and Zuikaku didn't want to push her.

Both she and Yukikaze knew that saying this to Shoukaku would accomplish nothing. Shoukaku lived in the shadow of her misfortunes from 'That War;' bringing up the events that followed would not bring her out from there.

"I understand. Thank you for your concerns."

In an increasingly choked voice, Zuikaku spoke to Yukikaze.

"At any rate, Hibiki, Yukikaze, focus on the battle. Just keep dodging, and we'll think of a way to defeat the enemy."

--Alright, then we'll leave it to you...because Yukikaze will never sink! Hibiki-nee, let's do our best together!"

--sounds about right."

Yukikaze shouted rously, while Hibiki responded with a hint of warmth, expressionless as ever.

Hibiki was one of the 6thDesDev and got along well with destroyers Ikazuchi, Inazuma and Akatsuki--but perhaps on another level, she had a certain connection with Yukikaze as well.

That aside, through her conversation with Yukikaze and Hibiki, Zuikaku felt that perhaps she had reached some kind of realization.

Perhaps the way to change Shoukaku's resolve was not through words, but actions...

(So maybe this is that most fortunate result...)

Five minutes later, one of the fleet's scout planes finally caught sight of the enemy main fleet.

This scout plane belonged to Standard Carrier Zuikaku.

Part 6

Whether it was because the Abyssals sensing the oncoming assault or a natural deterioration in weather conditions, the surface of the Okinoshima waters began to stir and roil.

Even so, the four carriers advanced at maximum battle speed, splitting the waters with their advance.

"Keep your prows upwind; all ships, begin launch!"

Shoukaku shrilly spoke above the din as she raised her own shortbow.

"Once the air group has assembled, send your attack teams west and target the main fleet that Zuikaku detected! The Fleet composition remains as previously--one flagship BB, three elite BBs and two unidentified DDs! All ships are currently advancing on our position in line ahead formation!"

"Understood!"

"This one attack will determine it all--everyone, I'm counting on you!"

"Understood!"

Between the order and the response, the six shipgirls had not forgotten to prepare. Shoukaku, Zuikaku, Hiyou and Junyou each loosed their arrows or launched their Shikigami and allowed them to fall into formation. Meanwhile, the two destroyers popped a smokescreen via their turbines as they moved into engage the Ru-class battleships in an attempt to draw fire from the carriers.

(This attack decides it all....!)

Repeating Shoukaku's line in her mind, Zuikaku continued firing her arrows.

(This battle is a chance to change Shoukaku-nee's heart--but, before that happens, we must win above all....!)

She continued shooting, even as she started to notice her ragged breathing. Each arrow split into the air in a burst of light, transmuting into the Type 52 Zero and Ryuusei Kai before forming into position. The Type 62 Zeros remained behind as a contingency plan, while the Ryuusei Kai all carried torpedos.

Zuikaku glanced at the other carriers--they, too, were also launching their carrier planes and then consolidating them. Shoukaku, like Zuikaku, carried Type 52 Zero and Ryuusei Kai, whereas Hiyou and Junyou carried the good ol' Type 21 Zeroes, Type 99 Dive Bombers and Type 97 Torpedo Bobmers.

The cloud of planes assembled in the air continued to swell into one large air group of some two hundred planes. Zuikaku had only seen an air group of this size once or twice even in "That War."

With the last launches came the sound of guns--the four RU-class had began opening fire at Yukikaze and Hibiki.

"We're counting on you, Yukikaze, Hibiki....!"

Eyeing both her own air group and the smoke-wreathed horizon, Junyou softly murmured.

"Because once you're destroyed, the targets become us....!"

Zuikaku felt her body clench. As Junyou had said, if Yukikaze or Hibiki were destroyed, it would be the carrier group's turn to endure the suppression shelling.

A great explosion in the distance, followed by a great pillar just over the Horizon; just the thought of the accurate barrage that had straddled Ise and Hyuuga now focusing on those two slender shipgirls made Zuikaku want to rush to their rescue.

(But, those two must....!)

Zuikaku forcibly suppressed these impulses. her thoughts a prayer. A second later--

"All air groups, begin your attack runs!"

Having waited until the air assembly had completed, Shoukaku gave the order.

"Your target is the Ru-class Battleship Group! We're counting on you, go!"

"Hopefully...an attack that'll finish them out of our visual range!"

Zuikaku shouted along with Shoukaku as Hiyou and Junyou also laid down their orders.

"Alright, let's get revenge for Akagi-senpai and Kaga-senpai! Right, Junyou?"

"Yeah! Let's give it our all and give 'em a beating--Off you go!"

In total over 200 planes formed the first attack wave; at the four shipgirls' order, they shot as one towards the enemy fleet. The sight left even Zuikaku, who had sent them, gaping--this was doubtless an all-in, all-out assault.

Among the most magnificent among them were Shoukaku and Zuikaku's Ryuusei-Kai attack teams. Protected by the Type 52 Zeroes in a vast inverted gull-wing formation, they advanced as a subversion of the past fast attacks of the past.

"Report from Hibiki--enemy battleships have opened up with AA guns,"

Junyou reported with a hand to her ear.

"But the effect seems limited--the Ryuusei-kai seems to be too fast for each battleship to cope!"

"In that case....!"

In the time that Shoukaku uttered her shout of anticipation, the attack teams began to separate, beginning their individual attack runs.

Planes began to fall. As expected, the four Ru-class' AA power was overwhelming; within mere seconds, the air was filled with the black puffs of AA fire. And yet as Hibiki reported, the enemy could not quite adjust to the Ryuusei Kai's speed--losses were significantly lighter than in previous battles.

And so, each of the attack teams launched their torpedos--moments later, the four Ru-classes were bracketed by water pillars.

(How's that....!)

Zuikaku clenched her fist as she stared in the enemy fleet's direction. It would be up to the closer Hibiki and Yukikaze to report the results.

Presently, Yukikaze reported with a tone of regret.

--no-go! Out of the four, two have been heavily-damaged, but the other two aren't hurt at all! One of them is the flagship class!"

"So they missed....?"

Shoukaku pressed with a voice of disbelief.

--No! The two enemy destroyers acted as shields...both those destroyers have sank! But....!"

Zuikaku stood dumbstruck. While everyone was aware that the abyssal were, like the shipgirls, capable and willing to act autonomously to protect the flagship, nobody thought that it would be at this time that--

But Zuikaku now admitted that they had been far too naive. Right after, Hiyou spoke up.

"All ships, begin evasive maneuvers! The surviving Ru-classes are now firing in our direction!"

"At this time?!"

Even as the others responded incredulously, a seemingly unending chain of explosions bracketed the field.

Zuikaku had not yet lost her bearings. Countless shells exploded around her with shockwaves that smashed her onto the water surface.

"Ugh....!" she murmured as she stood back up.

Enduring the pain, she looked around her--as the waterspouts collapsed, they left a cloud of mist in their wake.

Squinting, she made out the silhouettes of three shipgirls, each emitting smoke--and her face whitened.

(How--?!)

Of the three, Hiyou and Junyou showed clearly heavy damage. With their flight decks half ruined and their other equipment virtually wiped out, the two could only grit their teeth as they knelt on the ocean surface.

Shoukaku's damage was not as severe as those of the Hiyou-class--even now, she stood up, tottering gently. Even so, her equipment also bore significant damage--her combat ability would doubtlessly be affected.

The enemy's barrage in this direction had inexplicably halted instead of chaining. The only explanation was that Yukikaze and Hibiki had once more caught the enemy's attention.

(And what about the carrier planes?)

Zuikaku looked to the sky--from the horizon, the spent first wave was now returning. They numbered around fifty, virtually all of whom were the Type 52 Zeroes and Ryuusei Kai. Hiyou and Junyou's planes had been slaughtered, nearly to the last fairy.

Of the two hundred attack planes, only one in four had returned--the losses were exceedingly heavy, far beyond Zuikaku's worst fears. And now, the only carriers that remained were she and Shoukaku.

(But, we have to regain the initiative with these remnants...!)

The enemy still had two unharmed Ru-classes. If they didn't find a way to deal with this, there would be no chance of victory.

(But what should I do...?)

"Zuikaku, hurry and retrieve those carrier planes. Take my portion too."

Standing uneasily, Shoukaku glared at the enemy fleet with a simmering anger as she spoke to Zuikaku.

"We are launching a second wave. You deal with the elite, I'll find a way to deal with the flagship type."

"Find a way....what way is there?"

Zuikaku loudly voiced her doubts. Shoukaku was giving her own carriers to Zuikaku and simultaneously calling for a second wave--a normal carrier couldn't do this.

(No, we are shipgirls--as long as there's a will, there's a way....)

"Shoukaku-nee, you're not planning on closing in on the Flagship Ru-class and detonating yourself, are you....?"

Zuikaku's eyes widened. Shoukaku continued to glare the enemy vessel as before, confirming Zuikaku's suspicions.

Shipgirls had turbine systems as well. If they could close in on the enemy and then blow up their turbines, they could deal devastating damage--at the cost of their lives.

In "That War", one would normally never consider allowing a carrier to close in on a battleship. Even so, they were shipgirls--there were shipgirls who fought with sword, spear and anchor in CQC--there were even some who fought with bare hands and technique. From that standpoint, Shoukaku's strategy was neither particular outlandish or impractical.

But this strategy meant that Shoukaku would definitely die.

"No! If you do that--"

"There are no other ways to finish the remaining two Ru-classes,"

Shoukaku responded bluntly.

"From the enemy's AA abilities, the likelihood of finishing the remaining two Ru-classes with our remaining complement is low. If we use this tactic, we can finish both vessels."

"But....!"

Moreover, the Admiral has not given the order to retreat....that means the Admiral trusts us. That's why, we have to respond to that trust...!"

With that, Shoukaku turned to Zuikaku as she broke into her usual smile.

"Zuikaku, you are the 'Lucky Carrier'--you will definitely be able to use your ability to grasp the best possible outcome to bring everyone a miracle. No matter how hard the battles get, no matter how painful, you have to survive for that reason--so that you can reach out and retrieve it all--and I believe that it's my job to open that road for you."

".....!"

"For me, the one who bears the fate of 'the unlucky ship', this is both my desire and my salvation....so please, let me go."

Zuikaku could find no retort. Shoukaku's resolve was doubtlessly genuine, and this tactic was also logical. If the Okinoshima Main Fleet was not destroyed now, the homeland and the Naval District would be endangered such that it was possible that mankind would lose altogether.

The Admiral had also said that "Destruction of the enemy holds precedence over survival." Shoukaku's idea was backed on each front.

Apart from the fact that Zuikaku couldn't accept it.

(That's right. This kind of tactic is definitely flawed!"

Zuikaku bit her lip as she once more confirmed her own reasoning.

(We are shipgirls--we came here not only to win this war, but also to confront the memories of 'That War'...I'm sure the Admiral doesn't want Shoukaku do to this either....!)

What should be done instead--at this point, several memories surfaced in Zuikaku's mind.

The words the Admiral had said to her. The words Hiyou had said to her. That stone that Hiyou had hurled at the sea--

(THat's right. That's it.)

Zuikaku had found a chance to win.

Clenching her fist and enduring the pain, she righted herself and spoke:

"I don't understand as much as Shoukaku-nee thinks I do."

"Zuikaku....?"

"I can't accept something like this! I don't plan to live on for that kind of thing...that is neither my wish nor my salvation!"

She stared at the two Ru-classes in the distance. The sounds of shelling had not yet ceased--Yukikaze and Hibiki were still fighting. They trusted their comrades, carrying their survivor's guilt with them.

"This time around, I will definitely fight with Shoukaku-nee until the end--that is my wish and my salvation! And if anybody wants to stop me, even if that person is you, Shoukaku-nee, I won't let them!"

"Zuikaku! But that's the only choice if we want the operation to succeed....!"

"No, there's another way! Shoukaku-nee, look. I will definitely take down those two battleships and secure a chance to turn the tables! That's why--please don't give up and help me!"

In the course of this debate, the survivors of the first wave had successfully landed. In order to prepare them once more, Zuikaku raised her shortbow.

"Because I, Zuikaku-- 'The Lucky Carrier,' did not base my nickname on a lie!"

Next, Zuikaku continued to shoot out carrier planes--without assembling, plane after plane flew peacemeal towards the remaining two Ru-classes.

"Go----!"



The buzz of motors and propellers closed in--hearing it, Hibiki felt a sense of bemusement.

(To launch a second wave at this time...aren't they just asking to be shot down?)

".....!"

At that moment, another cloud of waterspouts surrounded her--clenching her teeth, Hibiki began evading.

After the conclusion of the four carriers' first wave, Yukikaze and Hibiki had been actively dodging the shelling of the two Ru-classes. Shoukaku, after all, had not given any new orders--moreover, Hibiki reckoned that she and Yukikaze would be in charge of drawing fire, whether they were retreating or fighting.

In "That War", Hibiki had understood that half-assed air strikes would have no effect on an opponent with a strong AA complement. This point had come long and hard upon the winners of "That War"--but this was the case even in mutually bloodless conflicts. Because it had long since become indirectly related to military affairs.

Even so, the surviving Standard Carrier was still doing this. Did she have an idea? Or were they simply making one last gamble--

(Zuikaku, you...)

The shell splashes were everywhere once more. As she evaded, Hibiki glanced at Yukikaze (who was doing the same) and the Attack Teams Zuikaku and company had released--

(....so that's how it is. That's not a bad way to go about it.)

Having figured out Zuikaku's plan, Hibiki's smile curled up into a trusting smile.



Zuikaku's attack teams were divided roughly into Type 52 Zeroes, Type 62 Zero Fighter-Bombers, and the Ryuusei-Kai, and flew towards the two Ru-class in that order.

The two Ru-class immediately stopped firing at Yukikaze and Hibiki as they opened up again with AA fire. Under the fire of both their main guns and their AA guns, the leading Type 52 Zeros withered, falling one after the other.

The Ru-class had become convinced that the Type 52 Zero carried bombs, and had thus focused their fire on the skies above. Whether the bombers was launching into level bombing runs or dive bombing runs, this response was reasonable.

And yet, the Type 62s behind the Type 52s descended to near sea-level, hugging the surface as if they were about to launch torpedoes.

This attack appeared to have taken the Ru-classes by surprise, and their AA fire flitted only intermittently above the Type 62 Zeroes. The Type 62s now flew clear of the barrage, dropping their bombs onto the surface as they closed into the two vessels.

Following the laws of physics, the bombs bounced across the surface as they closed in on the Ru-classes.

In front of the bombs were what looked like the Ru-class' radar systems.



"See that?! That's the power of Skip Bombing!"

Zuikaku's voice was full of jubilation--hearing it, Shoukaku gaped wordlessly at the explosions racking the Ru-class battleships.

She understood what Zuikaku was doing, or what she had wanted to do--Skip Bombing.

A bomber would close in on a target on the water's surface, not unlike a torpedo bomber. Launching at short distances, the bombs would hydroplane across the water's surface towards the target. This kind of attack required piloting, evasion and planes of the highest class; if done correctly, though, it dramatically improved hit rate. Since the velocity of the bombs themselves were rather low, their damage could not compare to that of dive bombers or torpedoes--but if it could penetrate somewhere relatively weakly armored, it would be more than enough to deal a devastating blow.

Skip Bombing was a tactic that had been employed by the enemies of "That War" against them, and Zuikaku had somehow managed to remember this tactic and use it in practice.

Using the Type 52s as a decoy and the Type 62 for the attack, Zuikaku had pulled it off. Moreover, the Type 62's targets were the radar FCS--a major player in both shelling and AA coordination.

--as predicted, the wall of fire put up by the Ru-class began to show cracks--cracks which the Ryuusei-kai rushed into, dropping their torpedos as they descended.

A new set of explosions appeared--the Ru-class were surely taking heavy damage. Even if they didn't sink outright, they would not be able to maintain their suppressing barrage--



(Zuikaku....my sister did it....?)

Staring Speechless, Shoukaku glanced at Zuikaku as she cheered on her attack teams.

Before this, she had always seen Zuikaku as an existence that had to be protected. This whole time, she had believed that protecting her until the war's end would give her self-sacrifice meaning. If that could be achieved, she believed that she could bear the fate of "The Unlucky Ship" without question.

But Zuikaku had managed to invalidate that with her own strength. No, perhaps that result was due to the power of "The Lucky Ship"--even so, this could not have succeeded without Zuikaku's will.

(This is how Zuikaku wishes to fight, to protect her comrades...)

The Salvation Zuikaku sought was not the same as the one Shoukaku sought--Shoukaku had known this from the start. And yet, she had always believed that this was the only way to victory.

That belief, now, had begun to unravel.

Zuikaku was not relying on the destiny of the "Luckiest Ship"--she had not yet resigned herself to that power. She was still trying to grasp the future with her own strength and will.

(Perhaps I can live like that as well....?)

Shoukaku felt a flicker of hope--but it was buried almost instantaneously by a wave of self-mistrust. Since she was the "Unlucky Ship," her biggest contribution would be to serve as the scapegoat for the misfortune of others--

"Come, Shoukaku-nee, bring in the second attack wave and let's launch the third one!"

Zuikaku ran and clutched Shoukaku's hand with hands of energy.

"If the two of us launch a new wave together, it'll make it harder for the enemy to catch a break! Those two ships are still there, we haven't won....but, we can definitely win!"

Zuikaku's confident words and her grasp began to shake Shoukaku's heart.

Zuikaku believed in herself. She believed that she could escape the grasp of destiny and surpass it all--she believed that she would be able to work hard no matter what.

As if to confirm Zuikaku's conjecture, the distant Ru-classes had regained the initiative, advancing towards Shoukaku and Zuikaku, in spite of Yukikaze and Hibiki's attempts to stop them with gunfire. Even if the third wave did not succeed in finishing those two battleships, it was possible that, with Hibiki and Yukikaze's survival, that they be finished with torpedos.

"Did you forget about us....?"

"We've taken the advantage~ but now is the time to be serious!"

Words from behind them--Hiyou and Junyou shakily stood up. Laying out their half-burnt scrolls, they began calling out what Shikigami they had left.

"We've still got half a flight decks, so we can at least send out some Zeroes as decoys--if it's necessary, we'll be your bait!"

"Hiyou, Junyou...! Mm, let's go!"

Zuikaku nodded vigorously before regarding Shoukaku.

"So come along too, Shoukaku-nee!"

"No-go, Zuikaku-onee!"

Yukikaze's shout echoed from the battlefield, as if to cut off Zuikaku. The sound of gunfire once again covered her voice.

"The Flagship Ru-class is firing again! It seems that her guns are undamaged!"

"....She can still move? Even when her radar's been ruined....she shouldn't even be able to fire accurately!"

Zuikaku's shock was palpable--but Shoukaku understood the Flagship Ru's goal. HE. The enemy had no doubt decided that four damaged carriers did not need precisely-aimed AP shells--area damage HE shells would be sufficient. The enemy, after all, was the defense-enhanced Flagship Ru-class--even if it had taken some severe hits, it was certain that its own shells would be accurate enough.

The whine of shells closed in. They would impact in less than ten seconds--from the sound, these were doubtlessly aimed at Zuikaku. Given the AOE of a HE shell, it was unlikely that Zuikaku would be able to dodge.

"How...!"

Zuikaku stared hopelessly at the sky.

And yet, Shoukaku immediately launched into movement.

(If I were to take this shell for Zuikaku, I'd definitely sink, and Zuikaku would definitely survive....but, if Zuikaku believes in me, then I, too....!"



Yukikaze's report had instantly dispelled the reveling atmosphere. As the whistle of shells closed in, the sudden reversal in situation had plunged Zuikaku into despair.

If she lost her ability to launch her carrier planes, they'd lose all hopes of a counterattack. That would make things a definite defeat--

(And we got so far....!)

The carrier planes she relied on were still returning, and all her ready air group had already been dispatched. She was out of options--

A moment later, Zuikaku saw a certain sight.

Shoukaku had nocked an arrow--a Type 99 with a bomb on board--onto her shortbow, and now raised it towards the descending shells.

"Shoukaku-nee...?"

"Trust me, Zuikaku....!"

Shoukaku's voice trembled ever so slightly at the end. She was scared, after all, of what she was about to do. Even so, Shoukaku continued moving.

"In order to continue with you, I'm going to give it a shot....!"

A sharp whistle from the shortbow as the type 99 shot into the sky. A moment later, the arrow separated into multiple Type 99's--charging at the descending shells. The effects were unknowable--this kind of thing couldn't possibly happen in "That War," after all--this was something only shipgirls and their logic-defying existence could do.

(But, I've never heard of using carrier planes to stop shells...)

For shipgirls, this was a completely novel tactic. In the worst-case scenario, both of them would sink from the failure of this tactic--it would have been safer for Shoukaku to just take the shells.

Even so, Shoukaku used this tactic in the hope that the two of them would survive. And in the meantime, she bore in her heart fear--fear that "my misfortune would trigger now."

Seconds later, multiple explosions racked the skies above Zuikaku and Shoukaku--the Type 99s had impacted the shells and triggered their bombs. Several more seconds later, explosions appeared around the two.

Due to the explosion of the Type 99s, the HE shell trajectories had been slightly altered. Furthermore, the Shells had still been a significant distance away from the two shipgirls--even a small alteration in angle had huge effects.

Next up, a string of further explosions--most of it was luck, but there were still many shells that exploded next to Zuikaku as planned. If Shoukaku had not acted, they might have all hit Zuikaku.

Several moments later, though now smoking, Zuikaku and Shoukaku still stood in combat-capable condition.

"Shoukaku-nee.....!"

Zuikaku bore an expression of disbelief. Next to her, Shoukaku sighed as she watched the sky.

"We got through....somehow....?"

I, too, can grasp my own luck--that was the feeling that pervaded those words.

"Even though I felt that I couldn't do it a second time...."

At this moment, the carrier planes of the second air group closed in on the four carriers, returning into arrow and shikigami form for recollection.

The two Ru-class now engaged Yukikaze and Hibiki once more. Both sides were engaging at unprecedently close ranges--this was the price of engaging the four carriers with no heed to the two ships in front of them. Under fire from Yukikaze and Hibiki's constant rain of shells, they struggled in vain to find an opportunity to fire with their main guns once more.

As long as that continued, it could definitely be done--with that conviction, Zuikaku shouted,

"Shoukaku-nee, do it! We can definitely do it!"

"...yes."

Shoukaku nodded in embarrassment. Saying goodbye to many of her old beliefs and tightening her expression, she solemnly gave her next order:

"The Third Attack Team, prepare to launch!"

"Understood!"

Part 7

There was a palpable sense of tension on board the Command Ship used by the shipgirls deployed to the Okinoshima Waters as a rest stop, and around the shipgirls protected it.

Since the Fleet led by Shoukaku had begun engaging the main fleet, all communication had ceased. The only person with the authority to watch the battle on screen was the Admiral; some reports were secrets even to the shipgirls defending the Command ship. In order to avoid accidents this time around, the Admiral had chosen to command from the Naval District.

The Escort Fleet consisted of the Fubuki-class destroyers, with Fubuki herself serving as teh flagship.

Perhaps unable to bear the tension, Isonami whispered,

"Shoukaku-nee and company should be fine, right...."

"It'll definitely be fine!"

Fubuki responded as if to reassure Isonami.

"Zuikaku-nee's with the fleet! Plus there's Yukikaze, Hibiki, Hiyou and Junyou-nee..."

Even if she knew there was no basis to her argument, she still responded.

"If it's the, they'll definitely...!"

"Oy, you guys, look!"

Miyuki pointed towards the horizon, where--"

"Is that everyone from the fleet?"



"We seem to have made it back..."

Zuikaku mumbled. She carried a heavily-damaged Hiyou on her right shoulder, while Shoukaku used her left shoulder to support an also heavily-damaged Junyou. While Yukikaze and Hibiki were unhurt, they had served as before as the four carriers' vanguard.

In the course of the battle with the Enemy Main Fleet, Zuikaku and company's third wave assault and Yukikaze and Hibiki's torpedoes had proved effective, sufficient for a victory. Even after Yukikaze and Hibiki's torpedos had lit her up, the Flagship Ru-class that had put Zuikaku and company in the danger zone had held on a little longer before ultimately succumbing and gently subsiding under the waves. Refusing to sink back into the abyss from whence she came--that seemed to be the impression given in her last struggle.

Nobody responded to Zuikaku's words--on seeing the command ship that would take them back to the mainland, each of them was flooded with relief. Even Shoukaku, as the older sister, was no exception--her expression suggested she had let out a breath of air she had held for a long, long time.

(But now the mainland has been protected, and we've maintained our initiative. Plus...)

"Zuikaku."

Suddenly, Shoukaku called her sister's name.

Shoukaku spoke with her usual gentle expression--albeit one that betrayed mixed feeling underneath.

"I'm sorry for before...also, from here on out, I'll be in your care. I, too, will do all I can so I can fight alongside you."

"Shoukaku-nee...."

Zuikaku's joy bubbled up like a fountain--this was the first time she had heard Shoukaku say what was in her heart. Of course, she had no proof for this guess, and Shoukaku perhaps was still at a loss.

Even so, Zuikaku remained overjoyed. In Shoukaku's eyes, she no longer appeared to just be the weapon known as "the lucky carrier", but as her sister--a shipgirl of her own.

And so, Zuikaku nodded vigorously before replying:

"Thank you, Shoukaku-nee! From here on out, as a shipgirl, I'll do my best....so I can become part of the main fleet like you!"

Shoukaku grinned awkwardly with a "are you still talking about that, even now" kind of smile.

"Even though we were helped by a lot of trump cards, in the end we made such an excellent result. As far as I'm concerned, you are already part of the main fleet. Just like me....rather, beyond me...."

"Even so, I am a shipgirl just like everyone else....not just that, but I want to be a "Lucky Carrier" that can bring Luckiness to everyone! As long as I still have planes, I won't lose....!"

In the distance, Fubuki and the other shipgirls on escort duty waved their hands as if in blessing as they closed in--

Epilogue

Part 1

Shrouded in twilight, the Naval District Office echoed with the Admiral's pleased tone.

"The Third Okinoshima Operation has ended with the complete destruction of the enemy main fleet and the retreat of the remaining abyssal garrisons in the surrounding area. While we took severe damage, no ships were sunk..."

The Admiral placed the report he had just read out loud onto the desk.

"An excellent battle report. Don't you think so?"

"Indeed, it's quite worth celebrating."

Having poured a cup of tea for the Admiral in the capacity of the acting Secretary Ship, light carrier Houshou broke into a heartfelt smile as she responded.

"Mm, with this the Anchorage in the Okinoshima Waters has now been disabled. We have secured the safety of not simply the homeland, but also of the entirety of the Nansei/Southwestern Islands. Of course, this doesn't rule out the possibility of a new enemy offensive; even so, supply convoys and other maritime traffic will now be able to sail unimpeded everywhere from the homeland to the Nansei Island Waters, up to the Western Seas we are now preparing to assail."

"Those two children of the 5thCarDiv seem to be very hardworking."

Houshou smiled, pleased. Nowadays she rarely fought on the front lines or served as the Secretary Ship - her main role nowadays was in logistics and food services. In the past, however, she had once been in charge of the training of Shoukaku and the other main fleet carriers.

"It'd be quite wonderful if Shoukaku could come around to a new point of view from all this."

"She'll be fine, with how her younger sister is. Both of them will be definitely be able to separate from their fates and find their own luck - and for me, that's perfect."

"And that's why you insist on using the Zuikaku's power as 'The Lucky Carrier'?"

"That alone is not enough to defeat the Abyssals. We do not know their source, nor do we know the circumstances or place of their birth. Even if we secure the Western Seas and enter an extended campaign, it may be that we are unable to hold out, as in the past. For that purpose, I hope to keep my trump cards in hand."

"That's not what Zuikaku would hope for."

"That's fine. I have no plans to fight a war in which I am dependent on that kind of ability from the get-go. Even so, we must make preparations for circumstance and happenstance."

The Admiral turned his gaze to the setting sun in the distance.

"...Not only that, our opponents are not simply the Abyssals."

Houshou nodded quietly in affirmation to what the Admiral had left unspoken.

Perhaps because the mood had darkened considerably, the Admiral spoke up again.

"Ah, I'll make sure that she doesn't hate me too much. After all, I do have to one day confirm with my own eyes what color her panties are. Shoukaku wears one of those sensual lace ones, so could it be that your's are--ahhhhhowowwwwow!"

The Admiral's hands stretched towards her hakama, but Houshou swiftly grabbed his hand before he could reach.

"You'll get punished for this kind of thing, Admiral."

"....."

"Even if you are deliberately trying to annoy them, there will be consequences for doing this kind of thing to those children. Well, although it's not completely forbidden..."

The Admiral regarded Houshou--in spite of her slight irritation, she seemed to have figured it out. Houshou nodded gently as if in affirmation.

"The war has not ended yet. We must do what we can to silently protect them...we must win, after all, but we must also rescue the hearts of those children."

"That aside, I heard that a shipgirl wanted to talk to me face to face?"

The Admiral's voice became serious with his inquiry. Houshou replied with a pained expression:

"I heard about this from the factory. The higher-ups have had a lot of opinions about what they want to do once she enters battle-ready status--though fortunately I've been able to stave them off thus far--and it's for that reason that I want to hear what she wants. The other shipgirls are currently off to welcome Zuikaku and company, so you are the only one who has heard this.

"....Let her in. Her life is my responsibility."

"Understood."

Houshou left the office. As if to replace her, a new shipgirl entered.

She was a slender girl, with thick dark hair. Clad in a specially made red-on-white dress, her hair bound with a cherry blossom bob. On her left arm was a badge emblazoned with the Z-flag--the flag of "That War" associated with the commitment to decisive battle. Perhaps it was because she was now in the Naval District, but she had not yet equipped the heavy outfit that had been depicted on the report.

"Welcome to the Naval District. Next up, although this is a little sudden, I'd like you to answer my question"

The Admiral greeted his guest from where he sat.

"Why have you asked to see me, before you have even been outfitted with your equipment yet? Neither the other shipgirls nor the higher-ups are aware of your existence. You can be said to be the true trump card of this Naval District--I was hoping you would be able to stay under the radar."

"Because there is something I would like to ask of the Admiral."

The ship known in "That War" as the largest, strongest, peerless Battleship in the world--the First Ship of the Yamato Class, Yamato, gazed at the Admiral with empty eyes as she spoke.

"Please sink me."

Part 2

The sea is their hunting ground. As long as there are no destroyers or light cruisers to drop depth charges, they are free to launch torpedoes as they like, hunting battleships, carriers, and other heavy warships.

"That's what they say, but we were just at the Northern Waters and Western Waters - now they want us to scout the southern waters too? They sure love ordering people around~"

Submarine I-168^[55] spoke with a weary voice.

As she had just said, she was now in the Salmon Seas, deep in the Southern Waters.

The Salmon Seas remained completely under the control of the Abyssals, and only submarine shipgirls could even come close.

The two submarines advanced through the unique cobalt-blue seas unique to the South, clad in the school uniforms specially manufactured by the Admiral.

"Since I've assumed duty on paper, I haven't even been inside the naval district yet! With all these constant sorties, I haven't even had

breaks! Ahhhh~really now, I want to do some sunbathing once in a while too!"

"There's no point complaining about it here~"

The other submarine, shipgirl I-58^[56], responded casually.

"Let's hurry up and get this job done, alright? Then maybe the Admiral will treat Goya to the Mamiya Jelly he promised me!"

"I wish I were as easily bribed as Goya!"

"What'd you say?"

"I didn't say anything!"

With that, the two floated onto the ocean's surface. This operation's goal was to probe deep into these waters.

"Well then...."

Under a cloudless sky, I-168 and I-58 showed their faces on the ocean's surface. If there were no mistake, there would be an island in front of them.

Logically, the island would host an Anchorage in construction, and it would not be unusual to see large amounts of abyssal ships. Of course, they were ready and eager to attack said Abyssals if given the opportunity.

And yet, a moment later, both I-168 and I-58's expressions froze.



"That's impossible...that kind of thing shouldn't be possible...!"

I-168 spoke as if she had found herself in a nightmare.

"That shipgirl-like thing...that Abyssal that's come ashore...what is that thing...?!"

"Imuya, planes in the skies!"

".....!"

Suddenly, a swarm of enemy planes began to dive as I-168 shouted:

"...! Goya, crash dive! How, how, why...?!"

Feeling a fear and confusion she had never felt before, I-168 could only flee back to friendly waters

Translator's Notes and References

1. world 2-4
2. Yes I know they're not sisters, that's what the words say though
3. DDs on 2-4?
4. "As if?" They're obviously responding to Akagi's voice
5. thank you
6. may just be a translator's error, but the abyssals are referred to with the feminine pronoun "她", not the male "他" or gender-neutral "牠" version
7. Fire (in english)
8. the chinese translation says they're "Relatively dumb"
9. Chinese Translator's note: mirrors Admiral Masatomi Kimura's statement during the Kiska campaign
10. chinese translator's note: the Battle of the Pacific
11. From Wikipedia, 6 Tatami is roughly $2.73\text{ m} \times 3.64\text{ m}$
12. fun fact, the term Zuikaku uses for the stuff that fills Atago's dress is 胴体, which means "carcass"
13. Battle of Guadalcanal/Philippine Sea for the gwailo
14. from both translations of the Zuikaku LN, both chinese translations indicate that the cat's name is something that rhymes with "Weigh Anchor, as shown below. As I'm not good enough at nipspeak to guess what that pun is, I'm just going to call him Wanker
15. the other translation calls it "Tatsuta Fried Chicken", so it's definitely fry, though I suspect there's a pun joke in here somewhere
16. "Ore", as Tenryuu says it
17. a guess, the actual term is "passed the water to"
18. I think this is Bashi island, but the direct pronunciation is Batan

19. looking at the two copies I have, one of them phrases it such that the fire from the destroyers and cruisers in ineffective, and the other of which implies it's ignored
20. this was hamfisted as fuck. I suppose since Zuikaku herself was a ship she could instinctively figure it out, but shiiiiiiit.
21. or, you know, just straight up invading other countries?
22. the text seems as roundabout as that sentence
23. jesus fuck I hope I don't have to put "Admiral" in quotes the whole novel (language!!)
24. Pearl Harbor
25. implying
26. that's what it says, I know Akagi was made from a battlecruisers. On the other hand, senkan (戦艦) can be used in Chinese in lieu of "Warship", so it's very technically correct
27. [The Pride of the 1st CarDiv Intensifies]
28. hurriedly would have been three sentences ago.
29. What glory, attacking a bunch of sleeping sailors and sinking? (Ninja Emon: well said)
30. hahahaha get it, zeroed in, like zeroes
31. which makes no fucking sense, with the exception of Kaga's 20cm, which were virtually useless in AA capacity, Zuikaku had double or more Kaga's AA armament!
32. Turkey Shooting
33. less than a knot slower than speedslut (Again, Language!!
He's referring to Shimakaze)
34. gasping sounds, we don't really do those in English
35. the term is "several tens of seconds", but since this is very awkward in English i tend to use "moments" to hide this
36. Probably a reference to the Tokyo Express. Guadalcanal Campaign in the Solomon islands.
37. I'm using this in place of Tone's "-da zo." I don't know how to approximate "Wagahai," however

38. at the time this was published, the dragon Kai II had yet to be released. At this time Souryuu and Hiryuu kai had only 7 more planes than Hiyou and Junyou, though their slots were superior
39. yeah because that worked so well at the Turkey Shoot right?
40. the chinese translator goes into great lengths using the japanese kyudo terminology, but I'm going to avoid doing that, as it adds no real purpose to the text
41. technically Kaga has only a slightly weaker broadside than the Aoba-class, since she mounts 5 20cm on each side
42. I'm sure this sounds better in Japanese
43. no shit?
44. Kaga says "you two, who have returned from your virgin battle," but that seems a little unlike her
45. 1st Battle Ship Division
46. Sister
47. Sister
48. the Chinese term literally means soldiers, but I'm not sure whether fairies and shipgirls fit the bill of soldiers
49. Thank fucking god, I'm fucking sick and tired of how many times I have to reword how Shoukaku just smiles softly/gently. Yamato Nadeshiko a shit (fuck your language).
50. are you fucking serious
51. unrelated note: Interwar USN surface combat doctrine involved engagement well outside of what was then considered standard engagement range. By doing this, the USN, which at the time lacked the battlecruisers and fast battleships Japan, the UK and Germany had, could avoid having their battleline turned and increase the odds of penetration through plunging fire, at the cost of somewhat reduced hit rate.
52. no shit, does this author know what subtlety means?
53. taken during the battle, no doubt

- 54. Yukikaze was transferred to the Republic of China Navy as Tan Yang, whereas Hibiki was transferred to the Soviet Union as Verniy
- 55. Her name is Imuya
- 56. Known as Goya

Kantai Collection - KanColle - Kakuyoku no Kizuna: Volume1

艦隊これくしょん -艦これ- 鶴翼の絆

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